THRILLING WONDER STORIES

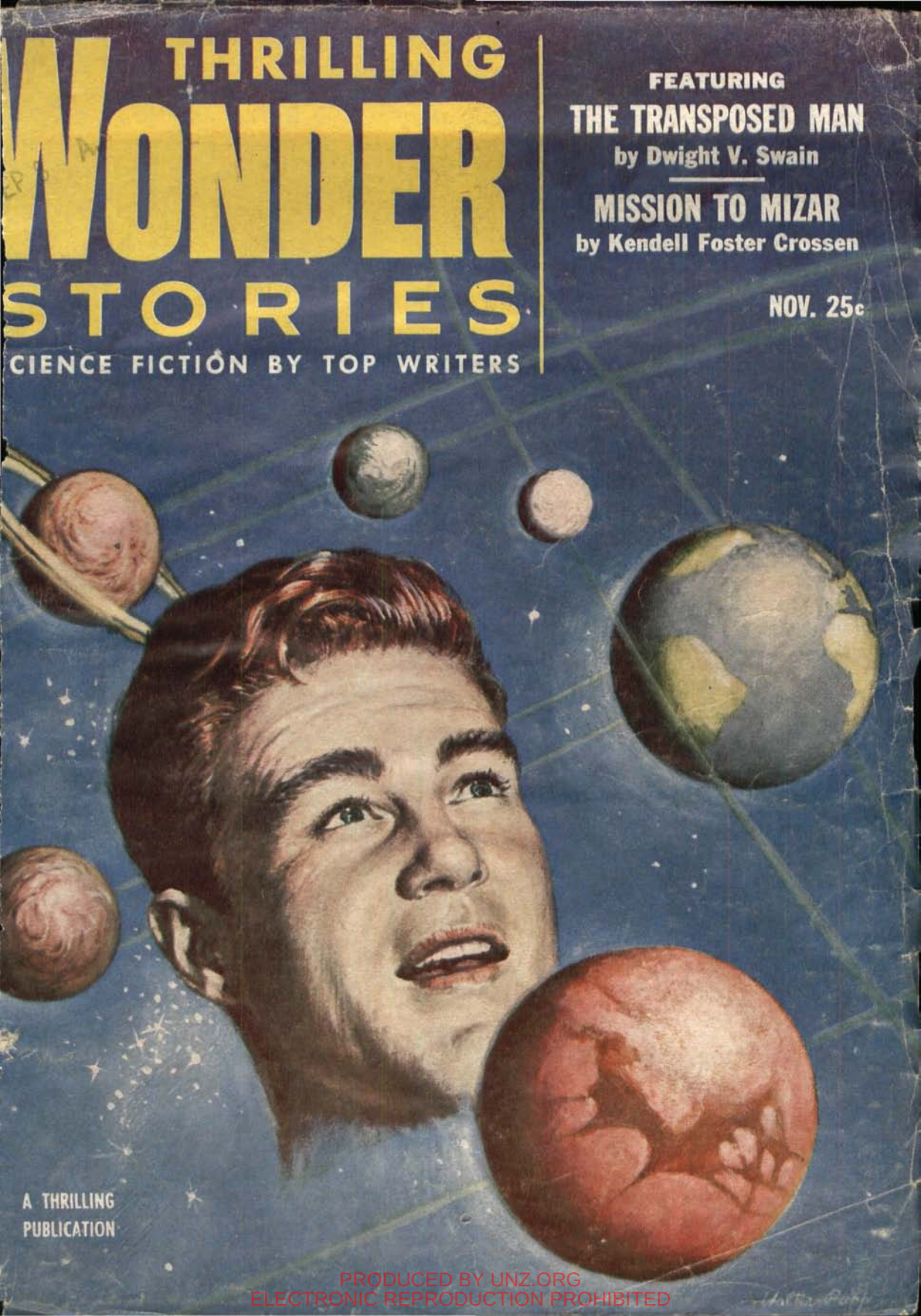
CIENCE FICTION BY TOP WRITERS

FEATURING

THE TRANSPOSED MAN
by Dwight V. Swain

MISSION TO MIZAR
by Kendell Foster Crossen

NOV. 25c



A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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1st Prize $15,000

The Amazing New EnterPRIZE PUZZLE CONTEST

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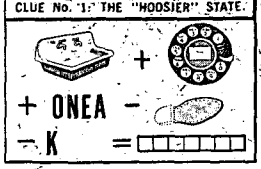
HOW TO SOLVE SAMPLE PUZZLE

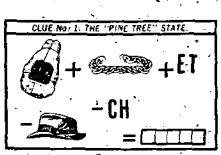
CLUE No. 1: THE "HOOSIER" STATE.



You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are *two plus and two minus signs.* It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

Fun? Yes! Now Solve This Typical Contest Puzzle

CLUE No. 1: THE "PINE TREE" STATE.



Here's a quick-action puzzle contest that rings the bell. It's fair, it's square — and it offers the winners a golden opportunity to get a new slant on Life! Just imagine — $15,000 in nice crisp crackling $100 bills! Well — YOU have the opportunity to win this kind of money, but you must act now! Simply fill out the coupon below and mail. The very day we get your coupon we'll rush you full particulars on the amazing new EnterPRIZE "Quick-Action" Puzzle Contest. Here's the golden opportunity you've been waiting for! Grab it!

FUN TO ENTER! FUN TO DO!

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The EnterPRIZE "Quick-Action" PUZZLE CONTEST is the contest every puzzle-minded person in the country has been waiting for. This contest is sponsored by the National Book Club to introduce its publications to as many new friends as possible. Just look at the SAMPLE PUZZLE at the left. Here is a typical puzzle with every picture waiting to be identified. Everything open and above board — nothing tricky. That's one big reason you'll agree this is among the fairest, squarest contests ever offered to American puzzle-fans.

FAIR AND SQUARE — ONLY STANDARD PICTURES USED! AN AMAZING NEW CONCEPT IN PUZZLES

To make the contest fair and square for one and all, the Judges and Sponsor of the EnterPRIZE PUZZLE CONTEST have decided to take *their picture illustrations only from* READILY AVAILABLE AND OBTAINABLE SOURCES.

AND MORE! Every solution to every puzzle has a point value according to an error-proof table of letter values. You will know AT ONCE if your answer is right or wrong.

WIN REAL MONEY!

You owe it to yourself to try to stop money worries and GET ON THE ROAD TO SECURITY. And here's your opportunity. For the price of a postage stamp, we will send you FREE the Entry Form, the Official Rules, the First Series of Puzzles — EVERYTHING you need to enter. So make up *your mind* now — decide to win! Get the facts and MAIL COUPON TODAY!!

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Mail this coupon at once and learn how you can qualify to win a special extra promptness bonus of either a 1954 Riviera Buick or a beautiful Ranch Mink Coat. The choice is up to you if you win.

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I TRAINED THESE MEN

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GOOD JOB WITH STATION
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"Four months after enrolling for NRI course, was able to service Radios . . . averaged $10 to $15 a week spare time. Now have full time Radio and Television business."—William Weyde, Brooklyn, New York.

AVAILABLE TO VETERANS UNDER G.I. BILLS

WANT YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

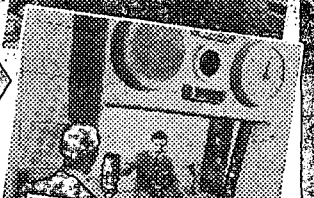
Let me show you how you can be your own boss. Many NRI trained men start their own business with capital earned in spare time. Robert Dohmen, New Prague, Minn., whose store is shown at left, says, "Am now tied in with two Television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Often fall back to NRI textbooks for information."

1. EXTRA MONEY IN SPARE TIME

Many students make $5, $10 a week and more EXTRA fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning. The day you enroll I start sending you SPECIAL BOOKLETS that show you how. Tester you build with kits I send helps you make extra money servicing sets, gives practical experience on circuits common to Radio and Television. All equipment is yours to keep.

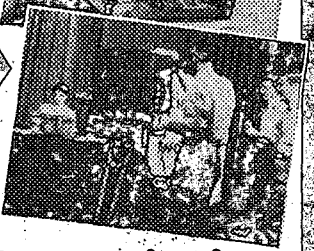
2. GOOD PAY JOB

NRI Courses lead to these and many other jobs: Radio and TV service, P.A., Auto Radio, Lab, Factory, and Electronic Controls Technicians, Radio and TV Broadcasting, Police, Ship and Airways Operators and Technicians. Opportunities are increasing. The United States has over 105 million Radios—over 2,900 Broadcasting Stations—more expansion is on the way.

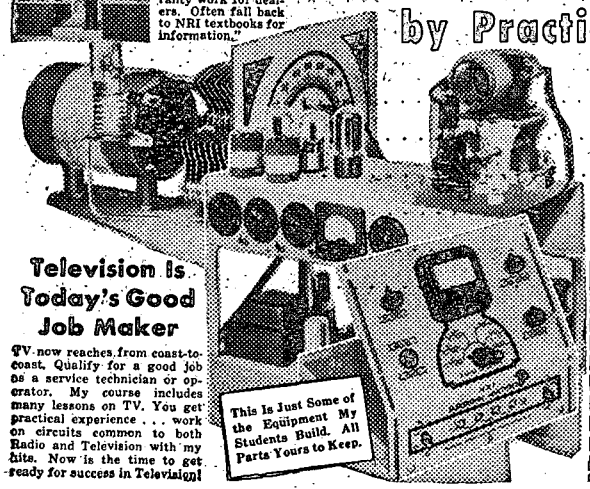


3. BRIGHT FUTURE

Think of the opportunities in Television. Over 15,000,000 TV sets are now in use; 108 TV stations are operating and 1800 new TV stations have been authorized . . . many of them expected to be in operation in 1953. This means more jobs—good pay jobs with bright futures. More operators, installation service technicians will be needed. Now is the time to get ready for a successful future in TV! Find out what Radio and TV offer you.



You Learn Servicing or Communications by Practicing With Kits I Send



Television Is Today's Good Job Maker

TV now reaches from coast-to-coast. Qualify for a good job as a service technician or operator. My course includes many lessons on TV. You get practical experience . . . work on circuits common to both Radio and Television with my kits. Now is the time to get ready for success in Television!

Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION Technicians. Most had no previous experience; many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. You also get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. Pictured at left, are just a few of the pieces of equipment you build with kits of parts I send. You experiment with, learn circuits common to Radio and Television.

Mail Coupon—find out what RADIO-TELEVISION Can Do for You

Act Now! Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Coupon entitles you to actual Servicing Lesson; shows how you learn at home. You'll also receive my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, Pres., Dept., 3MQ, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D.C. Our 39th Year.

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THRILLING
wonder STORIES

VOL. XLIII, NO. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION NOVEMBER, 1953

FEATURED NOVEL

THE TRANSPOSED MAN ..... Dwight V. Swain 10
No matter where he was, and no matter whose body he happened to be inhabiting, the traitor in his heart stayed right with him!

COMPLETE NOVELET

MISSION TO MIZAR ..... Kendell Foster Crossen 72
Manning Draco was used to doing his father-in-law's dirty work for him — but this was one time when he really cleaned up. . . .

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He wouldn't have her if she was the last dame . . . and she was!
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On a leave, the captain gave them something to remember him by
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It wasn't chlorophyll that made the money look so attractive!
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A large charge was just what the doctor prescribed for himself

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Cover Painting by Walter Popp

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EDWARD R. ROFHEART, *Art Director* SAMUEL MINES, *Editor*

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How long since your last raise?

Sure, you've had a "cost of living increase." But what about the *big* pay boost?—the kind the boss asks you not to talk about and the kind that starts you thinking about a new car, a better home, luxuries for your family!

If you've had one of these in the past six months, stop reading right here. If not, it's time to start doing something about it.

Look around you. The men who are advancing are the trained men. They've learned special skills that bring them higher pay. It's the men without training who get what's left.

What are you going to do about it? Just wait and hope for the jackpot to pay off? If you really want the *big money*, you can start by getting the necessary training at home in your spare time.

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- ☐ Carpenter and Mill Work
- ☐ Carpenter Foreman
- ☐ Reading Blueprints
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- ☐ Secretarial
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- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Personnel and Labor Relations
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- ☐ Traffic Management

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- ☐ Analytical Chemistry
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- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making
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- ☐ Sanitary Engineering

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- ☐ Architectural Drafting
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- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
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- ☐ Radio Servicing—FM
- ☐ Television
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Telephone Work

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- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
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- ☐ Railroad Administration

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A DEPARTMENT FOR SCIENCE FICTION FANS

MINIATURE universes have been a recurrent theme in science fiction, and an equally popular variant has been the tale of people reduced in size to inches or less. The authors have usually made the point that time speeds up for the wee folk, as does their entire rate of metabolism. Oddly enough, this is true, even though small creatures live by the same clock, ingest the same elements and presumably are moved by the same cosmic forces. Though the earth still revolves on its axis at the same speed and swings around the sun at the same rate, the small creatures live and die faster and this must inevitably affect their sense of time.

For some interesting evidence along these lines it is not necessary to call in our reduction machine, or to step out of our own time field. Living on our own planet are animals of varied enough sizes to demonstrate this phenomenon very well indeed.

To begin with, the heart beat of the human adult ranges from 50 to 90 pulses a minute, with the average about 72. A new-born child runs a little faster, 120 to 140 beats a minute. Normal breathing for an adult is about 15 times a minute.

Compare this with the smallest mammal—the long-tailed shrew, smaller than a mouse. The shrew's heart beats up to 1300 times a minute and to sustain it, the little animal must breathe 800 times a minute!

Even the familiar canaries and humming birds have a heartbeat of 1000 times a minute, with breathing and metabolism to match. Anyone who has ever owned a canary knows how food rushes through its tiny alimentary system—seemingly in minutes. Many wild birds eat their own weight in food every day. To match that the average human would have to eat over a hundred pounds of food a day.

Going up a little larger, the common mouse has a heartbeat of 620 to 780 pulses a minute. Beyond the size of man, the expected occurs—the rate is slower. The elephant's heart beats 24 to 53 times a minute and the whale's 12 to 23. No dinosaurs are around for us to apply the stethoscope, but it is a safe bet that their heart beats would be as sluggish as their vast carcass would indicate.

In all this we have been speaking of warm-blooded creatures. The cold-blooded animals are in a backwash of their own and are characterized by chronically low metabolic processes. A tortoise's heart, for example, beats from 10 to 20 times a minute and his other vital functions keep pace. Though size is not a factor here, the slow rate carries with it the long life span also.

Some astute writer could probably make a very credible science-fiction story out of the biography of the common shrew—a bloodthirsty little monster in miniature living in a little time stream of his own. Just another indication that science fiction isn't maybe so fantastic after all.

Letters From Our Readers

SOAP OPERA

by Lewis Kovner

Dear Mr. Mines: For months now I've been sitting here blubbering in my beard for a good sf mag on which to waste a quarter a month. Then I happened to chance on an old dusty copy of Thrilling Wonder Stories in the dark recesses of a second hand book store. The scantily clad maiden on the cover (this was before your glorious revolution) appealed to my nobler instincts so I purchased it for the fantastic sum of five cents. I was so happy with it that I spent my life's savings on a new copy and I have been buying it ever since. (How could I afford it? I got a job burning old TWS covers.)

Well, enough compliments. (I notice that your letter column isn't famous for them.)

The cover was awful, nauseating and strictly from hunger. Did you ever hear of a guy called

(Continued on page 122)

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THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him* or her your ideas? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

This *Free* Book Points Out the Way

The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. *They will show you* how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. *Use the coupon below* and send for a copy of the fascinating sealed *free* book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs.

The ROSICRUCIANS
(AMORC)

Scribe A.K.Y. The Rosicrucians, AMORC,
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California.

Kindly send me a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." I am interested in learning how I may receive instructions about the full use of my natural powers.

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TWS-11

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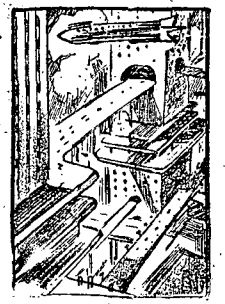
What's New in Science?



SEX IS BLAMED for a lot of the complications which beset mankind; now it is being examined for possible connection with cancer. The sex lives of a thousand women are being probed, a la Kinsey, in Los Angeles, to see what possible relation there may be. The first 300 cases have been questioned, half of them having cancer, half not. This much is indicated faintly: Women who married and had children before the age of 20 seemed more disposed toward cervical cancer. Whether racial or dietary characteristics have anything to do with it or not, Jewish women had fewer cases of cervical cancer and Jewish men fewer cases of prostate cancer.

DO YOU HAVE A RUBE GOLDBERG INVENTION in your attic? The National Inventors' Council, Chairman Charles F. Kettering, of General Motors, is looking for ideas applicable to defense. Headquarters are in the Office of Technical Services, Commerce Department, Washington. If you have a gadget which you think has commercial possibilities, the Dumont Television network has a program called The Big Idea which dramatizes four inventions weekly and calls for sponsors or manufacturers who might want to produce and market them.

NOT ONLY CHILDREN NEED ASSURANCE, but parents do as well. Many young parents are frankly scared to death of the responsibility involved in rearing children and terrified of making mistakes, giving the little angels a complex as a result. It is the job of child psychologists and specialists in child behavior to give the parents confidence. All children have an excellent chance of growing up to be normal, non-neurotic adults if they are made to feel accepted, wanted, liked.

THE HEAVY RAINFALL in the eastern part of the country during 1953 and the tornadoes elsewhere touched off a flood of inquiries as to whether A-bomb experiments might not have been the cause. The Weather Bureau says not, and this opinion is backed up by Dr. Vincent Schaefer, the man who originated the process of making rain by seeding clouds with dry ice. Dr. Schaefer points out that an A-bomb explosion, though it releases colossal energies, is a tempest in a teapot compared with an ordinary thunderstorm. One thunderstorm tosses around more energy than 50 atom bomb explosions. As for tornadoes—the energy in one of these twisters is small, only about 3% of that in an atom explosion, but the tornado is a product of a more complicated storm condition which spreads over a huge area and involves millions of times more energy than could be touched off by an atom explosion. Coincidence seems the only answer, for other stormy seasons have come and gone without convenient atom experiments to excite the curiosity.

POLYESTER RUBBER is the latest synthetic to be announced by a major rubber company with characteristics superior to the best of synthetics and natural rubber. It is said to have twice the abrasion resistance of "cold" rubber—the best to date. In addition, it holds air as well as butyl when used for inner tubes, and butyl tubes need be checked only a few times a year as contrasted with every week for natural tubes. It resists oil as well neoprene and has a tensile strength from 50% to 100% greater than most other known rubber materials. Goodyear calls it Chemigum SL and projected uses are for tires, shoe soles and heels, floors and for industrial belts.

—Dixon Wells

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No matter whose body he inhabited, the traitor in his heart stayed right with him. . . .

I

"NAME?"

"Robert Travis."

"Occupation?"

"Mining engineer."

"Place of residence."

"Seventh Base, Jupiterian Development Unit, stationed on Ganymede."

"Reason for visiting Luna?"

"I'm checking on performance of the new Dahlmeyer units in the Mare Nubium fields. We're

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The Transposed Man

A Novel by DWIGHT V. SWAIN

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thinking of adapting them for use in our Trendart field on Ganymede."

"I see. . . ." The port inspector fumbled through my papers, "Where's your cellemental analysis sheet?"

I shrugged "What would I be doing with a cell-sheet? I'm a mining engineer, not a damn bureaucrat."

The way I said it made it good for a laugh, but the inspector just pawed some more at my papers, not even smiling. "New regulation. Everyone's got to pass a cell-check now."

"But I've got clearance——"

"That don't matter. All routine clearances are cancelled." The inspector handed back my papers, jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Go to the last window. They'll fix you up with a sheet and check it."

I went on over to the window and waited while two men in white coats shoved a Van Cize celloscope up against a sad-faced, middle-aged woman's spine.

Then she moved on, and it was my turn.

The younger of the two white-coats adjusted the filter against the back of my neck. I decided he looked half human. "What's the idea?"

He grinned. "Mek trouble. Some idiot picked up a rumor that the Society's sending an agent to Luna, so Security orders cell sheets for everybody. Me, I think it's a waste of time. If those damned Meks are running a man in, he'll be under his own name. But you can't tell Security that." He stripped the sheet out of the celloscope. "Wait here a minute. This won't take long."

He stepped across to the check-frame, and I leaned back against the wall.

The port looked just about the way that I remembered it. A little older, maybe; a little dirtier. That was all.

A COUPLE of other *Aurora* passengers drifted up to the window to get the cell-sheets. They looked nervous. So did the others, the long lines of men and women still waiting for the port inspectors to check their papers.

I hummed a little tune. Because I didn't have to feel nervous. No one could identify me as Alan Lord, Mek agent; he lay back at The Center in a nutritor unit. I was Robert Travis, mining engineer, come all the way from Ganymede to Luna on legitimate business that anyone could check.

At least, for now I was.

I rubbed my elbow past the neurotron taped flat to my ribs; ran my hand over the spare strapped against my belly. A wonderful little invention, the neurotron. Given that, and my pulsator, and my com-set, I could go anywhere. Anywhere!

Young white-coat came back. "Travis. . . ."

I turned. "That's me."

"You're clear." He handed me the cell-sheet. "Go on over through that door to baggage inspection."

The sad-faced woman was ahead of me at the counter. A customs man had her stuff spread out all over the counter. An octagonal metal case about eight inches each way stood in the center of it. The inspector was tapping the case and shaking his head.

I caught the tail end of what he was saying: ". . .but it's FedGov property, and there's no way in this world or any other that I can let you keep it without a special release."

The woman's face was white as alsop leather. I could see her lower lip quiver. "But it's all I've got!" she choked. "My husband's dead, crashed there on Ceres, and one of the search crew brought me back this astronometer. He was holding it, they said—holding it. . . ."

She broke off, digging her chin down against her chest, sobbing in that awful, agonizing, silent way some women have. Looking at her, I suddenly saw Maurine instead, that night so long ago, the night she'd cried.

Maurine. . . .

For all the years, my throat drew tight.

The baggage man looked past the woman to me, brow furrowing, and

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spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "Lady, I'm sorry, believe me! But even if I let you take it, they'd catch it at the raybot."

A raybot—!

I swung round, not too fast, searching for it.

It stood at the far end of the counter, close by the door, where every person who went out would have to pass it.

My neurotrons would get through all right. So would the pulsator. But the com-set. . . .

"I'm sorry, lady," the baggage man said again. He was stuffing the woman's possessions back into the cases now. "Believe me, I'm sorry."

He picked up the astronometer and bent to put it underneath the counter.

I shot one quick glance around. No one was near; no one was watching. The woman still had her face hidden in her hands.

I slipped the pulsator—it was fitted into a writer case for camouflage purposes—out of my pocket and flipped the button. Before the baggage man could straighten, I leaned across the counter and touched it to his shoulder.

He gave a convulsive jerk and sprawled flat on his face on the floor.

I vaulted the counter and dropped to my knees beside him, dragging one of the woman's blouses with me.

Other customs men were turning, staring. "His heart!" I clipped. "Quick! Get a doctor!"

ROLLING the unconscious man over, I straightened his legs. That took me half-way under the counter—and under cover—back where the astronometer lay. Twisting open the adjustment panel, I shoved my com-set inside the case, then slapped the panel shut again and wadded the blouse around the bulky instrument.

Two customs men dragged my victim out into the open. I rose and skidded the astronometer across the counter, into the sad-faced woman's welter of possessions.

She stared at me blankly.

"He dropped it, Miss—" I glanced at her papers— "Mrs. Nordstrom. I hope it's not damaged."

Her blue eyes widened with sudden understanding. Hastily, she fitted the astronometer into one of her suitcases.

I turned to the nearest customs man. "This poor woman's husband was just killed in a crash on Ceres. Can't you get her out of here? He—" I nodded toward the prostrate inspector—"was helping her repack when he collapsed."

He glanced at the litter. "Sorry, this had to happen, ma'am. Sure, go ahead." He turned back to the man on the floor.

"Hasn't someone even gotten some water yet?" I demanded. "You people sure would have a hell of a time in a mining camp!" I elbowed my way past the inspectors and ran down the aisle behind the counter towards the raybot.

The switch was on the back, just as I

Science and Mystery

NOT too many good detective-type science fiction stories have been written and this is a curious thing because they seem to blend rather nicely. An author has to be consistent and logical to curb a standing temptation of solving his difficulties by pulling a scientific rabbit out of a hat whenever the going gets rough. This is unfair to the reader, since one of the precepts of the detective story is that presumably the author gives the reader all the clues he needs to decide whodunit. An author who keeps some magical science up his sleeve is cheating. THE TRANSPOSED MAN may keep you guessing, but plays fair in the main. It's a good sample of the fast moving, exciting type of science-mystery story which may become a staple in the next few years.

—The Editor

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remembered. I brushed hard against it. It snapped off.

I turned around and ran back. "No water at this end. Where in hell's the water?"

One of the customs men glowered at me. "What's it to you, Mister? And what are you doing behind this counter, anyhow?"

I glared back. "If that's the way you feel about it—"

"That's just the way we feel about it! Get back on your own side." The inspector's ears were pink. "Here. Where's your baggage? I'll check it myself."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Mrs. Nordstrom hesitate momentarily by the raybot, then step onto the scanner platform, luggage in hand.

Nothing happened.

Quickly, she went on out the street door.

"Well, you, what about it?" the customs man grunted. "Can't you spot your stuff?"

I glanced down at the man who'd taken the jolt from my pulsator.

His mouth opened; closed; opened again. Noisily, he sucked in air.

Five more minutes and he'd feel as fit as ever.

I grinned.

"Well?" It was Old Sorehead again.

"Right there, behind your man." I pointed to Robert Travis' bags. "The twin chronel jobs. . . ."

II

MY CONTACT'S name was Raines, John Raines.

I checked in at one of the big port hostels—Travis had made reservations—and called his number on the voco.

"Hello. . . ." It was a wary, greasy sort of voice.

"Is this Mr. Raines?"

"Yes. But who—"

"This is Robert Travis, Mr. Raines. I'm with Jupiterian Development, here on business. Our Mr. Azlon told me I'd find it worth my while to talk over some of the technical details with you."

"Azlon? Azlon—?"

"A-z-l-o-n." I let it hang for just an instant. "Z, as in zero."

"Oh!"

"I'm at Port Hostel Number Three," I said. "Room six-one-nine. I've got to head out for the Mare Nubium fields on the first carrier next cycle, so it would help if we could get together right away."

"Oh. . . ." Raines' voice wasn't quite so slick and greasy now. He sounded like a man trying to fumble his way out of a spot he didn't like.

"Why don't you come up for a drink or two, Mr. Raines?" I suggested. "No need for our talk to be dry, even if it is technical."

"Why . . . uh. . . ."

"Good." I clipped it short, not waiting for excuses "You know how Mr. Azlon is. Neither of us would ever hear the last of it if we didn't get together."

"Of—of course. . . ."

"Right away, then. I'll be waiting."

I thumbed the button down smartly to click a good, sharp period to the conversation, then turned to the directory hanging on the voco rack and leafed through it till I came to *Nordstrom, Helmar*. The address was the same as that on the sad-faced woman's papers—close to the port, in one of the astrogation personnel units.

I dialed the number. After a moment a woman's voice answered . . . a sad voice, a voice with tears in it.

I clicked down the button without speaking, and got up and went over to the window. It was the usual plasticon, cheap and beginning to warp, but with a Schweidler bipolaroid selector so that you could cut off the outside light when you wanted to go to sleep—a handy thing on a satellite like Luna, where the days seem to last forever.

Below me, autotrans spun along the ramp-spanned streets that sliced between the buildings' dull spun-doloid walls like lines in some complicated geometric problem. Beyond the buildings,

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outside the transparent shell that held the artificial atmosphere, the port spread in a gray-brown desert plain spiked with ramped silver spaceships. Far off I could see the shimmering green ripples that were the hydroponic tubes.

And overhead. . . .

I looked up.

Terra hung there . . . Terra, my homeland, the great green ball that forever wheeled slowly in Luna's sky.

Maurine Dorsett's homeland, too.

Terra and Maurine. They were linked together deep inside me, down where it hurt. Bleakly, I wondered if I'd ever see either of them again.

I was glad when the buzzer rang.

THE man at the door looked as greasy as his voice—short, fat, with a sickly smile that was pasted on. "I—I'm Raines. . . ." He kept dodging my eyes.

"I'm Travis." I stepped out of the way so he could come in; closed the door behind him. "Sit down. Have a drink."

He juggled the glass as if it were hot instead of cold, not speaking.

I said, "We might as well get to the point fast, Raines. The Center sent me here to check on two things: Aneido's visit, and the shorties."

For the first time, his eyes came up. "The shorties—?"

"We call them that." I worked on my drink. "Our laboratories have a shielding system. It's based on the fact that the human mind is actually an electrical device, a sort of organic computer and selector."

"Yes."

"Our shield is electrical, too. It's keyed to the same frequency as the human brain. Whenever anyone who's not insulated wanders into its field, it throws out tracer charges—not strong enough to kill, but so heavy that they short-circuit the brain synapses."

"Permanently—?"

"Permanently."

Raines shuddered.

"It's too bad," I clipped. "Zero doesn't like it a bit better than you do. But we've got to keep our laboratories secret. The Society's work is more important than snooping strays. If you don't believe that, you've got no business being a Mechanist."

Raines stared down at his glass, not speaking. His face had taken on a grayish tone, and tiny, greasy globules were appearing along the creases around his mouth and in the puffy flesh below his eyes.

"The important thing," I hammered, "is that those short-circuits survive. That's all right. Their minds are blanks. They can't give us away. Most of them are picked up by the authorities, sooner or later. So, for years, the FedGov's psych boys have beaten their brains to a pulp trying to figure out what's happened to the shorties, but they've never gotten to first base."

"Then—what—" Raines fumbled.

I leaned forward. "Something's happened," I clipped, "something the Society needs to know about fast. Out of a clear blue sky, orders have been sent down to all FedGov Security units to channel all shorties direct to the Humanics Research laboratories here on Luna." I gulped the rest of my drink, set down my glass. "What about it, Raines? You're with Humanics Research; that's why The Center decided to make you my contact. What's happening to those shorties?"

Raines squirmed and ran one pudgy hand around the back of his fat neck. "That—that's a secret project. . . ."

"Are you going to quote me security rules?" I came up fast, crowding in close to him. "Believe me, Raines, that's not what Zero would think was a satisfactory excuse!"

"But I don't know! It's not my project!" His voice had gone shrill. He cringed as far back in the chair as he could get. Sweat trickled out of the short hair along his ear and slid down his jaw. "Electro-neural Testing handles all that work. Doctor Burton's in charge—"

"And you know this Burton?"

"Why—uh, yes; of course."

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"All right." I stepped back and sat down again. "Now, about the other reason I came here: Aneido's visit."

"You mean . . . *General* Aneido? The Security chief?"

"Who else?"

"I—I didn't even know he was here."

"But you know where he'd be if he was here, don't you—the Security offices; the quarters where they put up visiting power piles?"

"Yes." Raines dragged out a rumpled handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his chin. "They—they keep an apartment over in that big Quiverna unit. We've already got a plant next door—a fellow named Heffner who's on the budget council."

"Good. I got up and put on my coat. "It's time we got to work, Raines. First, I want to meet this Burton."

Raines set down his glass. It rattled on the table.

"Come on!" I prodded.

He still didn't get up.

I let the silence drag, waiting.

He shifted and wiped his forehead. "Mr. Travis. . . ."

I didn't answer.

"Mr. Travis, you don't realize what you're asking!" He burbled the words, moving his hands in helpless, pawing gestures too small for the bulk of him. "What excuse could I make for introducing you to Doctor Burton? And what good would it do? She wouldn't tell you anything—"

I cut him short: "She—?"

"Doctor Burton is . . . a woman."

I waited some more.

"Besides . . . Security knows a Somex agent's coming. They're even making cell-checks! And if they should catch you—after I'd introduced you—I shouldn't even be here now—"

JUST watching him did things to my stomach. I looked away, off out the window, and touched the pulsator in my pocket. "Don't worry. Nobody's going to catch me."

"But—"

I swung around. "Don't worry, I said. I've changed my mind. I'm not even going to ask you to go with me."

"Mr. Travis—!" He struggled up out of the chair, and his face was like sunrise in Yogorbo. "Oh, I can't tell you how much I appreciate this, Mr. Travis. . . ."

"Forget it," I said. "I understand."

Flipping the pulsator button, I went with him to the door.

He reached for the knob.

I touched the pulsator to the back of his neck.

He straightened spasmodically and half turned. His mouth was gaping, his eyes already glazed.

I caught him under the arms before he could fall, dragged him to the bed, and heaved him up onto it, face down. Opening my shirt, I unstrapped the spare neurotron from its place against my—or rather, Travis'—belly, got out the scalpel blade, and slit the skin behind each of Raines' ears. They were only half-inch cuts, following the edge of the hair over the bulging upper ridge of bone. Raines didn't even stir.

The electrodes were paper thin. I worked them into the slits carefully, one on each side, making sure that they were seated solidly against the bone before I rubbed on the skinseal to close the cuts. By the time I had finished, not even a dermatologist could have detected anything amiss without a glass.

Next, I peeled up Raines' coat and shirt along his side, taped the neurotron itself into place, and tested the adjustment.

Raines moved uneasily. I began to pick up the hazy, disconnected fragments of thought that sometimes seep through from a host's own mind.

Lying down on the bed beside him, I slid the activator contact over.

There was a moment of black chaos. I could neither see nor hear nor speak.

Then it faded, and I had the usual queer feeling of being split two ways. With an effort, I fumbled the activator contact on the Travis neurotron to the

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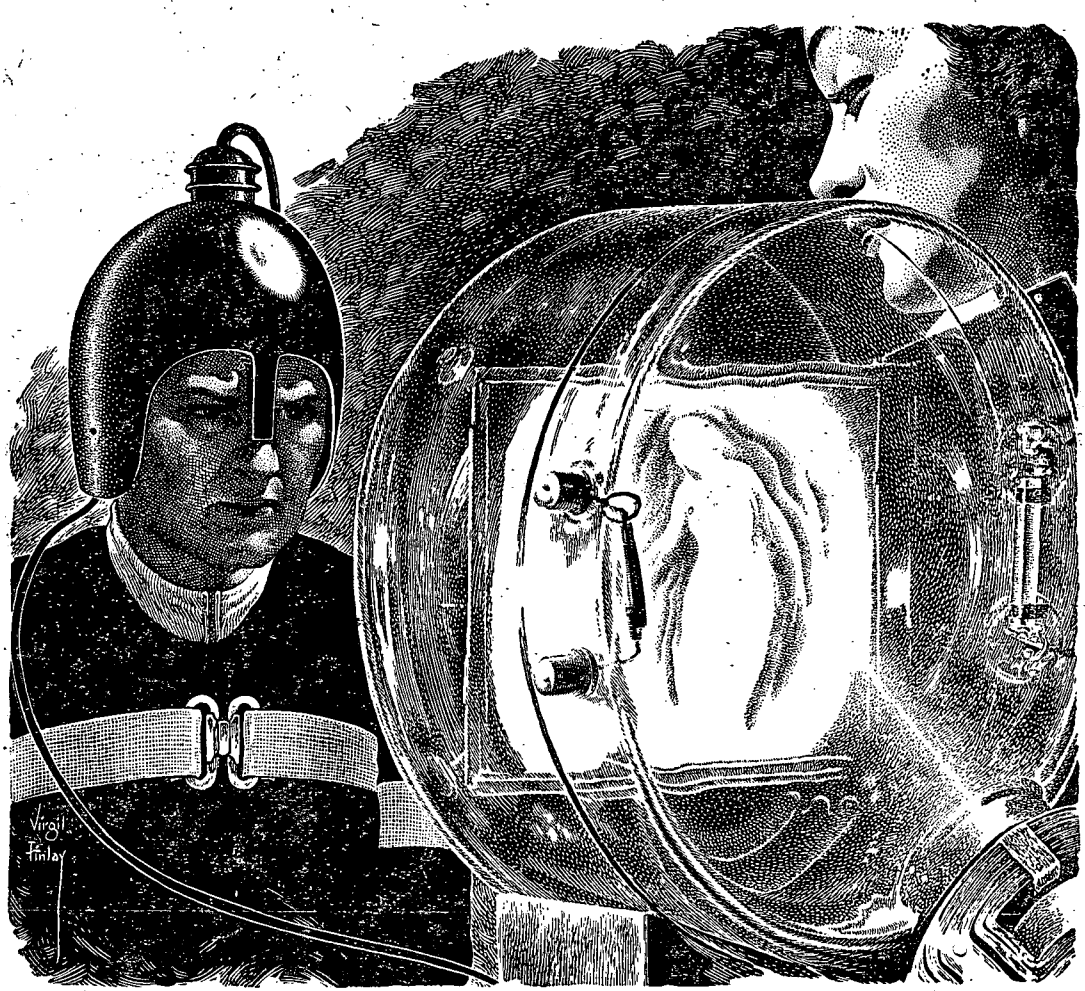

Maurine stepped in front of the screen

open position. The split feeling vanished. Stiffly, I rolled over and sat up.

Robert Travis lay prone on the bed beside me. He was breathing a trifle raggedly; that was all.

Otherwise, he looked exactly the same as he had the first time I'd seen him, that night on Mars.

I laughed, and wished I could see his face when he woke up and found himself already in a port hostel on Luna, with the whole trip in from Mars a blank.

Getting up, I went over to the mirror, took stock of my new personality, and decided that I didn't like John Raines any better from the inside than from without.

The clock above the door said this cycle was nearly half gone. Stripping, I went into the light-bath and tried to beam away the worst of Raines'—my own, now—greasy look, then came out and dressed again.

The clothes were like rags; even the coat had a scarecrow drape. I tried to shrug it into some sort of shape, but a stiffness through the shoulders balked me.

I took the coat off again and worked the fabric between my hands.

The stiffness lay between outer shell

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and lining. The meld wouldn't give, so I slashed a three-inch gash in the lining just below the collar.

The stiffness took the form of three narrow, flexible strips of what appeared to be plastic. One, blue and about six inches long, had been melded to the coat-fabric horizontally. The other two strips were green and twins, each nearly a foot in length. One of them dangled down vertically from either end of the blue cross-bar.

When I looked up, the clock said another half-hour had passed.

Time was running out. I put the coat back on, retrieved my pulsator and spare neurotron from Robert Travis, and left the hostel. . . .

III

THE building directory at Humanics Research said John Raines had an office in Wing G.

So did Doctor Burton.

I tried Raines' office first.

The door was unlocked. A tall, thin, stoop-shouldered girl stood by a microfile cabinet just inside, flipping a record reel through the reader.

I nodded to her, not pausing, and headed for the bigger of the room's two desks. When I turned to sit down, I found she had closed the door and was standing with her back against it, smiling.

Fumbling at the papers on the desk, I smiled back.

She shot me a kittenish, low-lashed look. "John. . . ." Her fingers picked nervously at the belt of her cheap purple veldrene dress.

I opened a desk drawer and poked at the jumble inside. "Yes?"

"You . . . forgot something, John."

"Well. . . ."

"John! Are you angry with me?" Her smile vanished, leaving her pallid and hollow-eyed. She came towards me with uneven steps. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." I closed the drawer, bent over the papers.

"Yes! There is!" She clutched my shoulder. "Tell me, John! Tell me!"

I began to sweat. "Look, I'm just tired. . . ." I tried to push her away.

"*John!*" She pawed at me. "John, is it that Burton woman? Has she been making more trouble?"

I started. "Burton—"

"John, have you been seeing her again?"

"No, no, no!"

"John, you have! You're still in love with her!"

I struggled up from the chair. "Are you crazy? Leave me alone!"

"No, John! No. . . ." She clawed at me, smearing me with clammy, ill-aimed kisses. Her frizzed hair got in my eyes and nose, and I bumped my chin on her scrawny collarbone. "I love you, John! I've given you everything! You can't expect me to just stand by quietly while you run after another woman—"

The girl's voice rose shrilly. She began to sob.

I shot a quick glance towards the door. I could feel the sweat trickling down my back. "Please . . ." Awkwardly, I put my arms around the creature; smoothed her hair. "Look, dearest, I'm just tired, I tell you. I've got a lot on my mind . . . things to do before the end of the cycle. . . ."

Sniffling, she wriggled against me.

I patted her shoulder. "Now, darling, I really have got to go."

She twisted; peered at me out of watery eyes. "But tonight—"

"Don't worry. I'll see you," I broke in hurriedly. "I'll only be gone a little while."

Her lower lip was still quivering. "All right, John. But . . . kiss me first."

It was a moist kiss, and too prolonged.

I went out into the corridor again, swabbing the sweat from my face with John Raines' soggy handkerchief and scrubbing my mouth with the back of my hand.

Doctor Burton's office was locked. I knocked.

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There was a moment's pause, then muffled footsteps. The door opened. A man stared out at me. He was about thirty-five—tall, well-built, almost too good-looking.

I said, "I want to see Doctor Burton."

HIS jaw set. "The question is, does she want to see you." He turned his head, spoke over his shoulder: "Maurine, the fat boy's here again. Do you want me to let him in?"

A woman exclaimed, "What?" and then, "No; I'll come there, Fred."

I frowned and moved back a little. I had a strange feeling I'd heard that voice somewhere before.

Again, there was the sound of footsteps—quicker, this time; lighter.

The man stepped out of the way. A woman appeared beside him in the doorway.

I caught my breath.

It was Maurine Dorsett.

The years had hardly touched her. Girl into woman, she still stood poised and slender. The gesture with which she smoothed and shaped the dark hair that swept down to the nape of her neck in a loose coil was familiar as yesterday.

"Well?" Faint scorn tinged her tone, her glance. The cool, intelligent eyes measured me as if I were a laboratory specimen.

I groped. "I . . . had an inquiry on your project—"

The man beside Maurine snorted. "You mean, you thought you might find her alone this close to the end of the cycle!"

She laid a slim, silencing hand on his arm.

"All inquiries regarding my project go through Security, Mr. Raines. You know that." Her voice was as cool as her eyes.

I fumbled, ran a hand over the back of my neck. "I—I'm sorry. . . ."

"You'll be a lot more than sorry if I catch you bothering Doctor Burton again!" the man in the doorway lashed. He took a quick step forward and caught me by my coat-front; pushed his face down close to mine. "Get this, Raines! The next time I find you sneaking around here I'll take care of you myself!"

"Fred!" Maurine's voice cut like a whip.

Sullenly, the man let go of me.

Maurine said, "Mr. Raines, I believe that by now it should be plain to anyone that I don't care to have anything further to do with you. If you actually have business that needs my personal attention, I'd much prefer that we transact it in writing, through channels."

She turned, went back into the office. The man shot me a final, hate-dripping glance and followed. The door swung shut noisily—almost a slam.

I stared at the closed door for a long moment. Then I swung around and walked off down the corridor. I kept on going till I was out of the Humanics Research building.

THERE was an autotran port across the street. I got into the first empty and ran the tracer over the shortest route to the astrogation personnel unit listed as the home of *Nordstrom, Helmar.*

Stepping into the unit manager's office, I borrowed writer, paper and envelope from the girl on duty and scribbled, *Your husband loaned me this a long time ago* on the paper. No signature. Folding the note around a fifty-credit bill, I sealed it in the envelope and addressed it to Mrs. Nordstrom, then dialed her number on the voco.

It was four rings before she said hello. She sounded as if she had been crying.

I said, "This is the unit manager's office, Mrs. Nordstrom. Could you drop down for a moment? Somethings's developed that we need to discuss with you."

She hesitated for a moment, then said, "Of course," in a weary voice.

"Thank you." I hung up, gave the envelope to the girl, and left the office.

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The Nordstrom apartment was on the third level. As soon as I was out of view from the unit office, I doubled over to the lift and rode on up.

Down the corridor, Mrs. Nordstrom was just closing her door. I walked past her with no sign of recognition.

She disappeared into the lift. I came back and went to work on her door's tab-lock. In thirty seconds the bolt clicked back. I stepped inside the apartment and closed and locked the door.

The astronometer stood on a small, ornate Venusian lorsch table in one corner of the livingroom. A sepia-toned, tri-dimensional kalatograph of a heavy-faced man wearing a space officer's cap hung in the wall angle above it.

I twisted open the adjustment panel, dragged out my com-set, closed the panel, and went out the back door of the apartment just as Mrs. Nordstrom unlocked the front.

Out in the street once more, I caught another autotran, ran the finder over a long, erratically-patterned route, then tapped out my signal on the com-set's call button.

The amplifier buzzed. "Identify yourself," a curt male voice commanded.

I leaned back in my seat and held the grillwork close to my mouth. "Four-to-the-fourth-power."

"Pass, four-four."

I said, "Top emergency. Let me talk to Zero."

"To Zero!" The voice from the amplifier sounded startled. "You know that's impossible. I'm authorized—"

"To hell with your authorization," I clipped. "I want Zero. This is Project X business."

THERE was more sputtering and muttering from the duty man, fading away to silence. Then another circuit clicked in, and Zero's voice crackled—incisive, peremptory. "Four-four! What's the trouble?"

I said: "My contact man fizzled out. I had to take him over with the neurotron."

"With the neurotron!" Zero's tone grew wintry. "It's a violation of orders to take over a member, Four-four. You know that."

"Even if he's a double agent?"

"A double agent!"

"It's happened before."

"But that contact. . . ." Zero's voice faded for a moment, then came back hard and clipped. "You've got definite evidence he's been reached by Security?"

"I don't know," I admitted, "not for sure. But he had the shakes beyond all reason, and I find he's been tangled up with at least two women."

"Who are they?"

"One's his secretary—a messy business. The other may be the key to this whole project. She's—"

"No names!"

I grunted. "Don't worry. I know the rules."

"Sometimes I wonder." The amplifier droned, wordless, for an instant. "Which segment of the project is she related to, A or B?"

"A. I haven't had time to get anything firsthand on B."

"And your contact—"

"He was A, too."

Then that's all your proof against him? Just what you've mentioned?" The frost was creeping back into Zero's voice.

"Not quite." I told him about the plastic strips melded into Raines' coat, describing them in detail.

"They could be the focal point for some new kind of finder the Security labs have developed. . . ." Zero sounded thoughtful. "You'd better bring that coat in when you come. Our com-men may be able to make something of it. Meanwhile—" more chill—"pay a little attention to regulations, Four-four. You're good; you're efficient. I'm the first to admit it. But you've got a headstrong streak, and we both know it. You didn't have to take your contact man over with the neurotron to handle this."

I didn't say anything.

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"Is there anything else?" Zero demanded.

"Yes."

"Well?"

I shifted, drew in a quick breath. "I want to be relieved of my assignment."

"What!" The amplifier squawked under the volume climb. "What nonsense—"

I muffled the amplifier with my palm. "No nonsense. I'm making a formal request for relief. For personal reasons."

For a few seconds the only sound coming over the com-set was the faint whisper of heavy breathing. Then Zero said, "Request denied." The temperature had dropped to-match his title.

I kept quiet.

Zero said icily, "The Society of Mechanists requires that its members accept strict discipline, Four-four—and for an agent on a mission as vital as Project X the standards are ten, a hundred, a thousand times as rigorous as they are for an ordinary worker."

I waited some more.

"Just what are these overwhelming personal reasons that force you to ask to abandon your job, Four-four?"

I said: "They're personal."

"Personal. . . ." The edge on Zero's voice suddenly wasn't quite so sharp. "How long have I known you, Four-four?"

"Ten years."

"Ten years. . . ." He made it sound like a long, long time. "Ten years, Four-four. And in all that period, you've never once tried to hold back anything from me."

I didn't answer.

"Ten years . . . and you say a woman may be the key to this whole project."

I shifted on the autotran's seat. My hand was suddenly sweaty on the com-set. I scrubbed it dry against my pant-leg.

"There was a woman for you once, wasn't there, back a dozen years ago, before I even knew you?" A pause. "Where is she now, Four-four? Could she be . . . on Luna?"

"Shut up!" I smashed my fist down on the com-set's grillwork. "A man's human, damn you! Just leave it the way I said it! I'm asking to be relieved from this assignment—"

"—for personal reasons." The ice was all gone now. Zero sounded old and tired. "Believe me, Four-four, I understand."

"Then—"

"No." I could almost see him shake his head. "You say a man's human, Four-four. But you're not a man. You're a Mechanist. The Society's works means more than you, more than your feelings. We can't afford to let this project fail. You'll have to go ahead according to plan."

"But—"

"Request denied."

The amplifier clicked off. . . .

IV

THEY called the place the Moon-Room. A replica of Luna, as seen from Earth, hung like a dim gold crescent against the deep blue of the artificial sky. Stars twinkled, and an aromador brought subtle fragrances of forests and streams and wind-swept hills. A thread of faint, languorous melody sighed and rippled on the climatizer's gentle breeze.

I gulped a vidal, then ordered spiked loin of rossa, seared in lorsch, with doralines from Mars and a salad of Ionian tabbat stalks.

It was good food. The rossa measured a full two inches thick, deep pink straight through, the fibers so tender from the infradation that my fork sliced them like a knife. The quince-tinted tabbat stalks—not one longer than a tarosette—had been gathered at the peak of their delicate flavor.

I ate slowly, savoring every mouthful.

Afterwards, there was thick Venusian ronhnei coffee, then more vidal. This time I didn't gulp it.

The cycle was over now. The long, dim room began to fill with other pa-

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trons, couples mostly. I leaned back, rolling the tear-shaped glass between my hands, watching them idly as they took their places.

A woman, alone, paused momentarily at the threshold. She was taller than most, sleek-lined and with her hair swept up and around in a style I'd never seen before. Stepping inside quickly, out of the opener beam, she disappeared into the shadows. The chromoid street door whispered shut behind her.

I caught the waiter's eye, tapped my empty glass. He nodded and headed for the bar.

A hand touched my elbow.

I came round with a jerk. The teardrop glass rang against the table.

"Oh, did I startle you, darling? I'm sorry. . . ."

It was the woman—girl, rather, I saw now—with the unique coiffure, the one who'd paused in the doorway.

She sat down beside me without waiting for an invitation.

Seeing her at closer range, I understood why she'd picked such an unusual style for her hair. Even in the dimness, it shone and rippled—thick, rich, tawny.

She smiled at me and moved her chair around a little closer. "Please try to forgive me, dear; I know I'm late. But they had a sale on hair brooches at a little place over near my unit, and you know how I love that kind of thing. Just look at the one I picked—the sets are real fire rubies!"

She slipped a clip out of her hair; handed it to me.

The pattern was one of interlinked zeros.

"Nice," I said. I pushed back my chair. "Shall we go?"

"Oh, can't I have just one vidal?" The girl was half smiling, half pouting.

Even pouting, she was pretty.

The waiter picked that moment to come back. I gave the girl the vidal.

She sipped it slowly, still smiling. There was something about her smile . . . something that reminded me of Maurine. I said, "Hurry up. We're late already."

She drained the glass without a word; rose in one smooth, graceful motion.

We left the Moon-Room.

OUTSIDE the street was narrow. It ran between buildings so tall that down here at ground level we stood in deep shadow, crushed down by the sheer bulk of looming spun-doloid walls. The stars overhead were pale splotches against the sky. Even the air seemed heavy.

The girl tilted her head. "Which way?" Her eyes were wide, and the corners of her mouth twitched as if she were having a hard time trying not to laugh.

"To the Quiverna," I said.

She turned right.

I fell in beside her. "Why did you come? Why not Heffner?"

"He didn't want to take the chance. He's on the budget council."

"Then why send anyone? I could have found his place without a guide."

She shot me a sidewise glance. "Not at the Quiverna."

"You mean—"

"You don't just walk into the Quiverna. It's for important people only. You have to be with someone who lives there to get in."

I nodded. "I see." We walked on a little further.

The girl's steps lagged. She gave me another low-lashed, sidewise look. "They . . . didn't tell me anything about you—who you were; why it was so important for you to get to Mr. Heffner's apartment."

"That's good."

She pursed her lips. "What *is* your name, anyhow?"

I threw her a stony look. "The Society's first security rule is that members must never reveal their names to other members. You know that."

She made a face at me. "I'll call you 'Hey-you,' then."

"I didn't mean—"

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She veered sharply, pulling me toward a shop window. "Oh, look at that rexolite gown! Isn't it lovely?"

I choked. "All rexolite gowns are lovely. That's why they cost so much. But sometimes other things can be important, too. Right now, I need to get into the Quiverna."

"Of course . . . Mr. Hey-you."

I dragged her bodily away from the window.

She hung on my arm, laughing—head back, tawny hair ashimmer. "Oh, aren't the stars beautiful? Do you think we'll ever reach them? Do you? Even with the new Karapesh drive, they're so far away. . . ."

"I ought to cut your throat on a Karapesh drive," I snarled. "Come on!"

"But it's so early. We could look at the stars—"

"Damn the stars!"

We reached the Quiverna's pretentious vitraline-and-chromoid entrance. Still giggling, the girl slipped her card into the tab-lock of the outer door. Noiselessly, it swung open.

The area beyond was bare, brightly-lighted. A voice from nowhere said, "Good evening, Miss Cherritt. You have a guest?"

"Yes." She turned to smile at me, eyes dancing. "He's Mister—"

"Raines," I cut in hastily. "John Raines. Humanics Research unit."

"Of course, Mr. Raines." The voice was ever so polite. "Will you please step over to the celloscope for registration? Security requires us to file a check-sheet on all visitors."

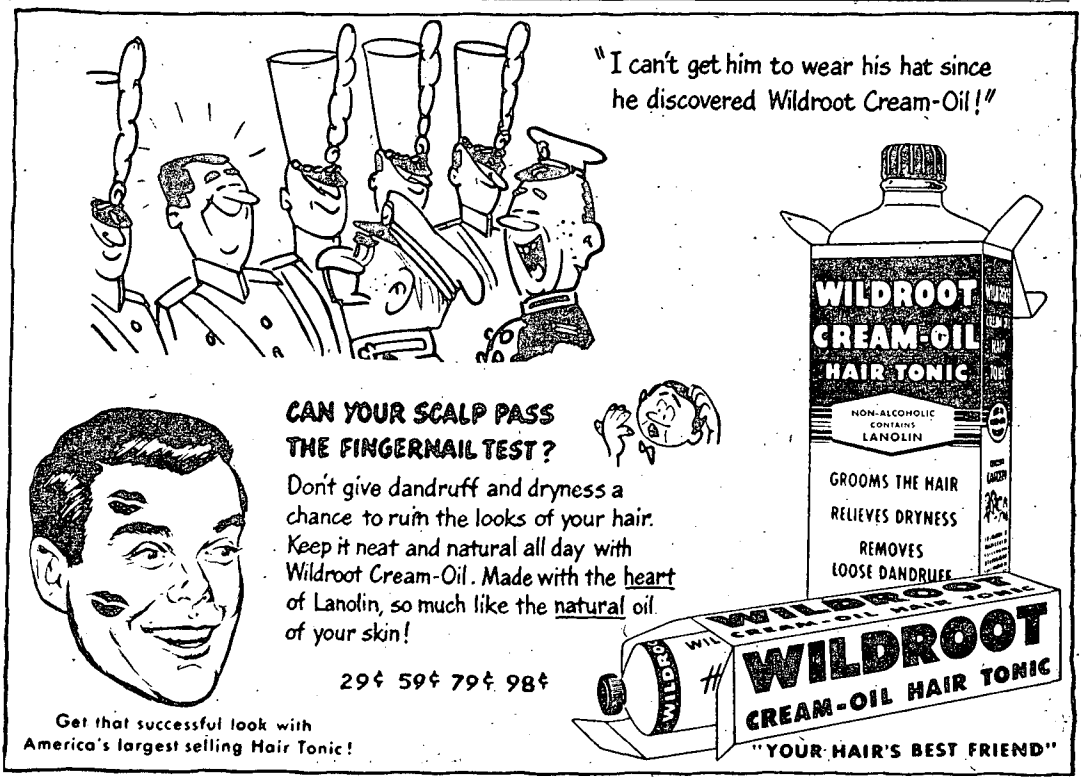
AS THE voice spoke, a panel in the wall to my left slid back, revealing a Van Cize unit's gaping lens.

I planted the back of my neck against it.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Raines. Just ring the bell inside when you're ready to leave."

A bolt clicked faintly. The inner door opened. I followed the Cherritt girl to

[*Turn page*]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the lift.

"Seventh level . . . Mr. Hey-you."

I swore under my breath.

"This way, Mr. Hey-you. Mr. Heffner's apartment is seven-three-three."

We walked down a long, silent corridor carpeted in dark rose veldrene to a door marked 733.

The girl reached for the buzzer.

I knocked her hand down.

She stepped back quickly, the laughter dying in her eyes.

I said, "You're going home now."

"But Mr. Heffner—"

"To hell with Mr. Heffner!" I caught her wrist. "You think this is just a game, don't you? It's fun; exciting. I thought so, too, once."

Her lips moved. "You're . . . hurting. . . ." The color had begun to drain from her face.

"Good!" I lashed savagely. "Maybe it'll help you to remember what I'm telling you." I twisted till her knees buckled and she swayed against me—head back, eyes closed, mouth working. "Listen! You're human. You like to laugh, to have fun. Maybe some day you'll even fall in love. But Mechanists aren't human. Mechanists are machines that are alive, tearing themselves to pieces while Security stands by and throws rocks in among the gear wheels. They've forgotten how to laugh, and fun is something other people talk about, and love is an obsolete word describing electro-chemical reactions in an organic test-tube—"

I ran out of words . . . shoved her away from me so hard she tripped and caromed off the wall, down onto the dark rose veldrene carpeting.

"Go home, you little fool!" I choked. "Get out while you've still got the chance! Go back to your thousand-credit Quiverna apartment and forget you ever heard of such an outfit as the Society of Mechanists!"

I stood there—fists clenched, breathing hard—while she dragged herself up, eyes fearful and uncertain. Her mouth opened as if to speak, then closed again. Without a word, she turned and limped off down the hall.

For a moment before she vanished, I thought I could hear her crying.

I jabbed the buzzer.

The door opened a crack. A black eye peered out at me.

"Heffner?"

The crack widened. A wizened face came into view, skin parchment sallow. The nervous black eyes looked past me, flicking glances up and down the hall.

"She's gone," I clipped. "I sent her home. This isn't public business."

"Oh." It was a croak, more than a word. The door swung back the rest of the way. I stepped inside.

Heffner closed the door after me. He was a little man, bent and spindle-thin. His features were pinched, his skull balding. His fingers trembled so much he had trouble with the bolt. "I—I'm not used to this kind of business. I never expected—"

"You never expected to have to deliver, is that it?" I swung round and looked over the room, with its paradone and chromoid and foamex—all the accouterments of luxury. "You figured the Society would go on helping you pay for this just as a worthy charity that was your due as a member of the budget council."

HEFFNER bumped against a low stand of inlaid azure chromoid. His eyes sparked. "Young man—"

I kept on prodding. "Did you think our work was all talk, Mr. Heffner? Or are you just stupid?"

I could see his lips draw thin. He'd stopped trembling.

I said, "No one ever thinks his own day is really going to come, when he joins the Society. Only now yours is here, so let's get on with it."

"What do you want?" He was biting off his words now.

"A look at the apartment next to this one—the one Security holds for special visitors."

He nodded stiffly. "This way."

I followed him to another door. He

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unlocked it, and we passed into a bedroom.

He touched the left wall. "Their livingroom is just beyond this. And we've installed a perceptoscope. . . ."

"Good." I waited while he wheeled the bulky case out of a closet. "You can go back in the other room now."

His nostrils flared angrily. Pivoting, he stalked out, leaving me alone.

I closed the door behind him, then aligned the perceptoscope's scanner against the wall and flipped the switch.

Slowly, as the tubes warmed, the scope's screen began to glow. A dim image took form.

Humming, I adjusted the focusing dials. The image sharpened, till it was as if I were looking through a window into the adjoining room.

Save for details, the place duplicated the luxury of Heffner's broad parlor . . . tinted chromoid furnishings made less bleak by the sparkle of paradone insets . . . veldrene carpeting and Nacromean velvet drapes . . . a decor that combined triangularity with sleek Modarc curves.

While I watched, a heavy-set, middle-aged man in formal FedGov uniform moved into the scope-screen's frame. He walked like a bear. His cuffs bore the triple planets of a general officer, while his shoulder-patch carried the silver shield and black dagger of the Security Service.

Pausing in the middle of the room, he glanced toward a clock on a stand nearby.

It brought his head round. I saw his face.

It was Aneido . . . Aneido himself, General Karl Aneido, chief of the whole FedGov security system.

I stopped humming. My fingers were suddenly slippery on the focusing dials.

Aneido belched. Frowning at the clock, he ran thick fingers through a mass of wiry black hair.

With infinite care, I pin-pointed the focus.

The general lumbered over to a built-in microbook case, ran a blunt thumb across the backs of the reel-cartons on the top shelf, finally pulled one out. Prodding a foamex chair closer to the reader, he sat down with a jounce, snapped the reel into place, threaded the film, and clicked the first frame onto the screen of the reader.

Now the broad shoulders slumped a trifle. The lines that set off the thick lips and heavy jaw looked less like chiseled granite.

Then, abruptly, his head came up. Eyes no longer sleepy, he stared across the room, at some point outside the scope-screen's frame.

Hurriedly, I snapped on the audio unit.

ANEIDO surged up from his chair and lumbered out of view. The audio picked up the click of a door-latch. A man's voice said, "My dear doctor! I'm so glad you found time to come. . . ."

The words were pleasant enough, but the voice held iron undertones.

There was no answer; only the sound of the door closing.

Aneido moved back onto the scope-screen. "Over here, please, Doctor. We have so much to talk about. . . ." He chuckled.

A woman stepped into the frame . . . a trimly slender woman with dark hair.

It was Maurine.

There was no reading her expression. Still without a word, she crossed to the chair Aneido indicated and sat down, smoothing the skirt of her dark suit across her knees.

Aneido said, "We'll talk in just a moment. Wait. . . ."

He disappeared again, then came back with a crackle-finish black metal case about a foot square and six inches thick. Dropping into the foamex chair, he opened a panel in the front of the box.

Inside was a single switch.

Maurine looked at the case, then at Aneida. I could see her brows draw together just a fraction.

Aneido laughed. "No need to look so puzzled, my dear. It's just that this mat-

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ter is so important, we can't afford to take chances on a leak. This little device"—he ran a blunt thumb along the black case—"insures us against eavesdroppers."

"Eavesdroppers—?" It was the first time Maurine had spoken. There was a tenseness in her voice.

"A very dangerous eavesdropper, Doctor," Aneido nodded. He leaned forward. The pupils of his eyes seemed to dilate. "Tell me, please: What do the numbers four-four mean to you?"

I stood stock still.

"Four-four—?" Maurine traced patterns on the purse in her lap with a gloved forefinger. "I'm afraid it doesn't mean anything to me, General."

"I'm very glad to hear you say that, Doctor. Because four-four is the Somex numerical designation for the man who's the top Mek secret agent." Aneido moved in his seat. His head seemed to sink down between the heavy shoulders. "He's on Luna now."

"On Luna—?" Maurine's head lifted. "But . . . I thought you'd instituted a cell-check."

"Ah, the cell-check. . . ." The general chuckled mirthlessly. "Never underestimate an adversary, my dear This man is daring, and truly clever. He has a powerful organization behind him. We think he slipped through inspection in the guise of a mining engineer from Ganymede, a Robert Travis. Or possibly as a space-captain's widow, a Mrs. Nordstrom. How did he do it? I'm still not sure. But do it he did."

"I see."

"He's slipped through all our nets—once, twice, a hundred times. But now his luck's running out." Aneido's thick lips drew back. His eyes glinted. "That's why I asked you to come here tonight, Doctor." He hunched forward still farther; thumped the arm of the foamex chair. "Together, you and I, we're going to trap him."

Maurine's feet moved back, a fraction closer to her chair. She sat a little straighter. "But how?"

Aneido laughed. "That comes later, my dear." He bent over the black case. "It's time we turned this on."

He flipped the switch.

My perceptoscope's audio unit erupted a jumble of squawking sounds. A snowstorm of lines and blurs swept across the screen, blotting out Maurine, Aneido, the other room.

I swore and worked at the focusing dials. But it was no use. Aneido's black box was a scrambler to end all scramblers.

After a while I turned the perceptoscope off. . . .

V

THERE was a fabric store just across the street from the Quiverna. I bought two yards of close-woven, opaque harrah cloth, took it into the nearest alley, and scuffed it in the dirt till it lost all resemblance to new material. Then, folding it up again, I tucked it under my—John Raines'—coat and rode an auto-tran across the city to where Maurine Dorsett-Burton lived.

As the voco directory had told me, the building lay on the fringe of the oldest part of the base development area. Here there was stone as well as doloid; a shabbiness that marked this off from the newer units. A thil-shop stood on the corner, and a drunken crewman from one of the cargo tramps running the triangle trade routes staggered past as I got out of the autotran.

I stepped into the building's murky lobby. No one was there; the place even lacked a desk.

The buzzer board showed a "DR. M. BURTON" in apartment 4-D.

Unfolding my strip of grimy harrah cloth, I draped it over my arm and waited while the minutes dragged by. Down the street, a bare-headed, white-haired man hobbled into the thil-shop. His back had the unmistakable twist that comes with Mercurian xaython fever. Two heavy-bodied women with their hair cropped short on the left side after the

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manner of European colonists clumped past me.

I kept on waiting.

Then, somewhere near, an autoran droned. I stepped back as it rounded the corner and pulled to a smooth halt in front of the building. Purse in hand, Maurine got out.

I took to the cover of the wall angle at the foot of the stairs.

The door creaked. Footsteps drummed a brisk cadence.

I raised the harrah cloth.

Maurine rounded the corner.

I whipped the cloth down over her face, around her head.

She kicked, twisted, flailed at me. Tangling her in the rest of the cloth, I snatched her purse from her hand and ran out the door, then ducked quickly into the lobby of the next building.

The purse held the usual hodgepodge; nothing more. Pocketing the money and tab-lock cards, I shuffled the assorted ID cards, then thumbed through an address book tucked into a side compartment.

The only Fred listed was surnamed Caudel. He had an address not too far away.

I dropped the purse into the lobby salvage slot and started walking, not pausing till I reached a point across the street from Fred Caudel's apartment building.

The place looked cleaner and better kept than Maurine's. Before I could go in, the door opened. A man came out—the same tall, too-handsome man I'd met—unpleasantly—at Maurine's office.

The one she'd called Fred.

He strode off briskly down the street. I waited till he had a hundred yard lead, then followed.

Two blocks farther on, he turned right, plunging into the cramped streets of the old base area, close to the first port. The thil-shops crowded close against each other, almost one to the drunk, and the air grew heavy with strange smells. Somewhere some sort of drum was booming.

It was a neighborhood where it would be easy to lose a man. I narrowed the gap between us.

The drum boomed louder. I could see it now—a percussor mounted on a high street-stand beside a doorway just ahead.

The tall man veered as he neared it. Stepping round the stand, he strode into the building.

THERE was a garish sign over the doorway. In glaring scarlet serpentine letters it proclaimed, *Chamber of Horrors*, and below that, *Monsters of the Void—Strange Life-Forms from Other Worlds.*

I crossed to it. People were moving around inside. I glimpsed Fred Caudel climbing a narrow stairway at the far end.

A woman stood by the door. She had red hair and a mouth to match, and her short spangled jacket was too small across the chest.

"Come on in, Mister," she wheedled. "It's only half a credit. We've got things here you won't see anywhere else on Luna—or Terra, either. Transmi from Benus, a Martian dotol, life-forms from every world and satellite. Like this thing. . . ."

She gestured to the street-stand.

I looked up. An Ionian quontab was chained to the railing. It swayed from side to side, beating the percussor with its shoulder-hammers.

". . . only half a credit . . ." the woman repeated loudly.

A sailor from the FedGov fleet pushed past me with his girl, going in.

The redhead leaned back against the door-frame, twisting so that the too-tight jacket brushed my arm. "Come on, honey. The lecture starts in just a minute, and afterwards, maybe. . . ."

She left it hanging. I fumbled a half-credit into her hand and went on in.

Smells hit me in the face—rank smells, fetid smells, smells that were indescribably rotten. I wandered among

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cases and cages where eye-stalks waved and mandibles bumped plasticon as they reached for me. Pseudopodal horrors from the cave-swamps of Mercury's Twilight Zone oozed in and out of crevices. Voices went shrill, and men jumped back. There was even a monstrous, ten-tentacled poison zanat, swimming in a sealed tank of refrigerated ammonia and methane.

I worked my way back towards the stairs I'd seen Fred Caudel climbing.

A knot of curiosity-seekers had gathered outside, now. The woman's back was towards me.

I went up the stairs, three steps at a time.

The door at the top stood half open. I slipped through, into a tiny cubicle of office. No one was in it, but it had a second door.

Drawing out my pulsator, I tried the knob.

The door was unlocked.

I eased it open the barest crack, listened.

No sound came.

I opened the door further and stepped into a cramped, garishly-furnished livingroom. It, too, was empty. I locked the door behind me.

Somewhere close at hand, a sudden swish of running water gushed and gurgled.

I flattened myself against the wall beside the room's other door and waited.

The door opened. The tall man, the man Maurine had called Fred, came out.

I jabbed the pulsator against him.

HE CRUMPLED. Working fast, I slit the skin behind his ears, inserted the electrodes from my alternate neurotron, adjusted the sensitometer, pushed the activator contact over—and in two minutes was myself in full control of that same Fred Caudel's body, looking down through his eyes at the fat, limp, bedraggled, unconscious form of John Raines.

Across the room, the knob of the office door twisted.

Tucking in my shirt, I went over and opened the door an inch.

The redhead in the too-tight jacket stood on the other side. "Fred! There was a fellow here—"

"This one?" I opened the door wider, so that she could see Raines.

"Yes!" She slipped inside; clung to me, breathing hard. "Who is he, Fred? Do you know him?"

"Yes. He's over at Humanics Research—"

"My God! With Security—"

"No."

"Then what did he want? Is he onto us?"

"Hardly."

"Then why—?"

"Why does anyone snoop?" I shrugged. "I think he was just fishing. He picked up an idea somewhere, and now he's trying to fill it out."

"I wish I could be as sure of that as you sound." She looked up at me searchingly. Her face might have been almost pretty without the thick, smeared make-up. "How much longer will it be, Fred? Before you get the rest of the dope you need from that Burton dame, I mean. You said it wouldn't take you but another day or two."

I said, "It won't. Believe me, it won't."

"Tomorrow, maybe?"

"Maybe."

"And then, to sell it to those Mek characters, those master minds . . ." The woman shivered convulsively against me. "I hope it's worth it, Fred. Because if anything goes wrong—"

"Nothing's going wrong." I broke away from her and knelt besides Raines. "Get me some tape."

"What?"

"For his eyes."

"Oh." She crossed to a cabinet, came back with a roll of adhesive. "Here."

"Thanks." I began sealing strips across his lids in a gummy, impenetrable blindfold.

"A million credits!" The woman rolled the sum over her tongue as if she

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liked the taste of it, in spite of all her doubts. "Do you think they'll really pay it, Fred? Even the Meks are going to think a long time before they put out that kind of money."

"They'll pay it," I clipped. I strapped Raines' wrists tight together with his belt. "They'll say it's cheap at the price."

"I wish I could be sure. If we can just get away with it . . . go off someplace, a million miles from them damn geeks downstairs. They stink so, and every time you go past you can see those slimy eye-stalks waving. Sometimes I think I just can't stand it any more . . ."

The woman's voice trailed off. She gestured to Raines. "What . . . happens to him?"

I went to work on his ankles with a strip torn from his shirt. "I'll put him away for a while."

"Not . . . for good?"

"No. Not unless something happens."

"Thank heaven for that!" the woman breathed hoarsely. "I don't think I could take murder."

I finished Raines' ankles; got up. "Forget it."

"I can't forget it." She was pressing against me again, hanging on me. "I'm scared, Fred. I'm so scared I don't know what I'm doing."

I held her for a moment. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"It's this whole business." She shuddered. What goes on in her mind, Fred? That Burton slut, I mean. This projectoscope thing—it's awful! To reach into a man's head, drag out his thoughts . . . just the idea of it gives me the creeps!"

To reach into a man's head, drag out his thoughts . . .

I stood very still.

"No wonder Security wants it!" the woman whispered. "Think what it'll mean, Fred. Screen a Mek with it—he don't even have to talk; they'll still nail him. What chance will sharpies like us stand?"

She was shivering again. I gripped her shoulders. "Easy, Red. You've got to relax."

"I can't. Talk just won't do it. There aren't any words . . ." She writhed. "This damn jacket! It's too tight. Open it, Fred."

I began, "This is no time—"

Her fingers twisted into my hair. She pulled my face down. The red mouth trembled against mine. "Open it, damn you!"

I was glad I'd tied Raines . . .

VI

I DROPPED by Maurine Dorsett-Burton's office at Humanics Research early the next work-cycle. I didn't bother to knock.

Maurine stood beside her desk, holding a black-framed picture.

She looked up, almost too quickly, as I came in, and laid the picture face-down on the desk. "Fred—" Her eyes were a trifle red.

"And good morning to you, too," I said.

She didn't smile. "You know you're not supposed to be here."

I brought out my wallet, riffled through the cards. "This—" I extended the right one—"says that Fred Caudel is a technician assigned to Electro-Neural Testing."

"But not to this project." She squared the picture with the edge of her desk. Tiny lines crisscrossed her forehead as her dark brows drew together. "You can't seem to understand that my work is top secret. If Security were to find you here—"

"—we'd both be in trouble. The trouble is, you're in trouble already, only you won't admit it. This kind of trouble—"

I leaned across her desk as I spoke, and picked up the picture. It was a portrait of a man, keen-eyed and broad across the forehead, with hair greying at the temples.

Color touched Maurine's cheeks. She lifted the portrait from my hand and put it into a drawer. "There are times when

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you remind me of John Raines, Fred—and that isn't a compliment."

"I still say you can't live with it."

"A widow has to have something to hold to, Fred."

"Maurine. . . ." I fumbled. "I'm sorry."

"There's no need to be. It's just that—"

She broke off, turned, picked up a folder. I couldn't see her face.

I ran my palm along my pant-leg. "How's the project coming?"

She kept her face averted. Her voice held a tiny thread of strain. "Sometimes I wonder about you, Fred. It's as if you were trying to get into trouble—as if you wanted Security to clamp down on you. . . ."

I didn't say anything.

She said, "You remind me of another man I knew once, years ago. Alan Lord was his name. He pushed, the same way you do. He liked trouble, danger."

I folded my arms, cupping my sweating hands over the biceps, and held my hip hard against the desk. "What happened to him?"

"He . . . became a Mechanist. It was that headstrong streak he had; that, and a strange, warped sort of idealism. I think he really believed that science was everything." A far-away note crept into Maurine's voice. "I tried to show him that people weren't robots, and how the Somex couldn't help but grow into a tyranny worse than the FedGov ever dreamed of being. But he couldn't see it. So . . . he went his way, and I went mine."

"Did you . . . love him?"

The papers rattled in the folder.

I said, "Don't answer that, Maurine. Only a ghoul like me would ask it. Let's talk about your project."

"It's—it's all right."

"Have you heard anything more from Security?"

The folder slapped down on the desk. "You're determined to get into trouble, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "I'll leave if you want."

"No." Straight and slim, eyes level now, she faced me. "Maybe that's what I want, too. To get into trouble."

"With Security?"

"With someone. I guess I don't care who." She turned. "I'm running a test on a new case this morning. You can help me."

I followed her into the laboratory room behind the office. Bare, blue-white walls gave it an aseptic look. The furnishings were limited to a table and two chairs. A bulky apparatus equipped with what looked like a reader screen stood on the table.

Maurine pressed a buzzer.

ALMOST at once, a side door opened. An attendant led in a shambling, blank-faced man. He had the loose mouth and unfocused eyes of someone who had wandered into a Somex laboratory's mind-shield.

Maurine rested her hand on the back of the chair directly in front of the screen. "Put him here, please." And then, when the attendant had seated the blank-faced man in the chair, "You can go now. I'll buzz you when I'm through."

The attendant left.

Maurine handed me a jar. "Here. Grease his temples."

I obeyed.

Lifting a strange, helmet-like metal casing out from behind the screen, Maurine began adjusting set-screws. "Now grease that ridge behind his ears. And stripe the center of his forehead from the hairline down to the bridge of his nose."

I smeared on more of the unguent in the jar.

Head tilted, Maurine inspected the job. "Good. He's ready for the cap."

I picked up the metal casing. Electrodes projected inside it at points corresponding to the spots I'd smeared. Setting it down on the shorty's head, I adjusted the contacts, then clamped the chin-piece tight.

"Don't forget to strap his arms and legs, too. Sometimes the first impulse

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startles them, you know."

I looked behind the screen, found another helmet and a tangle of straps. In less than a minute I had the shorty anchored as directed.

Maurine held the jar now. She was greasing her own head in the same pattern as the patient's. That done, she put on the second helmet, then handed me two cables, each connected to the apparatus behind the screen.

"You can plug us in now."

The plugs were eight-contact females. Eight metal prongs thrust up from the crown of each helmet.

I plugged the cables to them.

Maurine stepped back to the control panel of the apparatus behind the screen and threw a switch, then worked intently over an assortment of dials and indicators. A faint humming sound rose.

She straightened. "All right, now. We'll give him a quick run, first. Just don't say anything."

She clicked a knob to the right.

The blank-faced man stiffened against the straps. His mouth twitched.

Maurine stepped around beside me, in front of the screen, and raised a stiff white card. "Dog."

Nothing happened.

"Mother."

There was a faint flickering on the screen—an ebb and flow of shadowy patterns.

"Hate."

The patterns faded.

"Somex."

Nothing at all.

"Wife."

Shadowy-patterns, perhaps a trifle stronger than those in response to the word *mother*.

"Ink."

A blank screen.

"Knife."

Nothing.

"Kiss."

A momentary flutter.

MAURINE walked back to the control board, clicked the knob left. "You see—?" The cool beauty of her face was shadowed. She smoothed the coil of dark hair in the old, familiar gesture. "On most words, there's no response at all. Even the ones that touch the deepest roots, the closest inter-personal relationships, only bring shadows."

I nodded slowly.

"There's a synaptic inhibition, Fred. A block's been set up against memory, against association. That's the only explanation. Here—" she thrust the white card at me—"try me. See the difference."

I took the card. She turned—another notch left, this time.

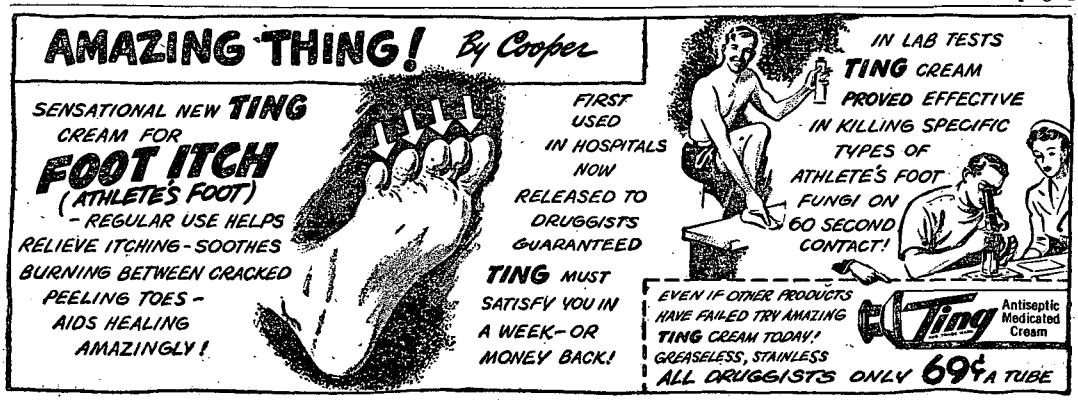
I read the first word on the card: "Dog."

The screen flickered. A brown mongrel bounded across it, leaping and frisking.

"Mother."

A white-haired woman appeared.

[*Turn page*]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Then, in a flash, the scene changed. The same woman, younger this time, stood laughing by a table, holding a candle-sparkling birthday cake. The next instant she lay in bed—old again, eyes and cheeks sunken.

"Hate."

The screen blurred. Here and there, unrelated fragments flashed through; that was all.

Maurine said, "You see? Hate's an abstraction. You can't get too clear a picture from it without more specific stimulus, except in paranoid cases."

I nodded, read the next word, "Somex."

My own face stared up at me from the screen. Not Fred Caudel's face, but my own—the face of Alan Lord as he had looked those twelve long years ago.

The knob on the control board clicked. The screen went blank.

Mausine said, "That's enough of that. We'd better get back to our case study." Her face was pale, her eyes on the dials of the apparatus.

I nodded, not speaking.

"We'll run him through the entire list this time, then try to rebuild associational relationships in the areas where we got the best responses." She was Doctor Burton to the hilt, now—all cool poise and brisk efficiency. "I've never told you, Fred, but I've got a theory about these cases—and it won't be mere theory much longer, if these tests develop the way I think they will."

I pretended to check the electrodes on the blank-faced shorty's helmet. "A theory? What is it?"

FOR a moment her fingertips drummed against the table. Her face grew serious. "I imagine you know that the brain comes close to being a sort of electro-chemical computer?"

"Yes."

"To break it down even further, each neuron is a tiny dynamo, producing current. The neurons connect by intermeshing synapses, by contact only. The synapses act as switches, routing the nerve current from one neuron to another."

"That's basic neurology."

"The synapses can act as circuit-breakers, too."

I straightened. "What?"

"They're organic electrical equipment. They can be overloaded."

"In which case—"

"They break the circuit. Or even short-circuit." Maurine's eyes were suddenly alight with excitement. She leaned on the projectoscope. "Don't you see? It happens in neurosis and psychosis every day, Fred! First, inhibition blocks the free flow of nerve current. An overload piles up. Finally the synapses can't handle it any longer—and you have breakdown!"

"But what's that got to do with him?" I gestured to the shorty.

Maurine's lips curved in a slow smile. Her voice dropped a note. "What if it were possible to project an overolad into a man's brain, Fred—a sudden, overpowering electrical pulsation keyed to the same frequency as human nerve current? Mightn't it precipitate a complete, permanent, synaptic block—an artificial amnesia? Because that's what's wrong with this poor thing! He's suffering from chronic synaptic inhibition. His brain synapses won't pass on thought impulses from neuron to neuron—so his whole associative processes have broken down!"

I sat down on the edge of the table. "It's a good theory, Maurine. But I don't see how it could happen."

"I do," she retorted. "I can see Somex centers hidden on every satellite and planet—with a shielding system around each one to shoot an electrical overload into any brain that came too close."

My lips were suddenly stiff. I said, "That's nonsense. You haven't any proof—"

"Not yet." She stood erect once more, lovely face mask-like. "Give me the word-card please. We'll run another test. You may chart the record—the forms are over here."

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"And by whose permission may he chart the record?" a deep voice demanded.

I whirled.

General Aneido stood in the office doorway, stiff-necked and grim. Two cold-faced Security operatives in mufti waited close behind him.

"I asked a question, Doctor!" He bit off his words. "What is this man doing here?"

Maurine stood cool and straight. Her cheeks were a trifle pale. "I asked him to assist me."

"Without regard for security regulations? In spite of the fact that I warned you less than a cycle ago that your work must be kept a complete secret?"

Maurine's expression did not change. "He was cleared by your own staff before being assigned to duty at Humanics Research—"

"But he wasn't cleared for work on this project!" The general strode on into the room—face flushed, jaw jutting. "I'm not accustomed to having my orders so blithely disregarded, Doctor!"

I broke in, "It's my fault, General. I was interested—"

"And how did you learn about the project? Where did you find out enough to become interested?"

"I—"

"Quiet, Fred." Maurine rested her hand on the projectoscope. "General Aneido, had it occurred to you that this device is my own development? That I've spent years on it, discussed it a hundred times with my colleagues here in Electro-Neural Testing before you ever heard of it? Security or no security, I needed their help as fellow-scientists—"

ABRUPTLY, Aneido brought up a broad, blunt hand. "That's enough, Doctor Burton. We'll take up the security violation later, through the proper channels. What I want now is evidence that this apparatus—" he gestured to the projectoscope—"will do the things you say it will."

"Of course." Maurine adjusted the metal casing on her head. "The theory's fairly simple. It's based on the fact that all mental activity is really a conditioned channeling of electrical discharges into subjective perceptual images in response to specific stimuli."

"Can you put that in layman's language, Doctor?"

"I can oversimplify it, perhaps, by saying that whether you're conscious of it or not, thoughts flash pictures in your brain."

"I see."

"My projectoscope simply transfers those pictures onto a screen." Maurine touched each element as she spoke. "I use this Talodak unit, here, to boost the nerve current to the point where it will activate an inversion of the old Renkinov stimulator, linked to an extremely sensitive artificial retina—"

Again, Aneido brought up his hand. "The technical details mean nothing to me, Doctor Burton. As I told you last night, the practical applications are all I'm interested in. If this device will show men's thoughts so that I can uncover secret Meks, that's all I ask. I want to see a test."

"Certainly." Maurine stepped back and turned to the two Security agents. "If one of you gentlemen will just sit down—"

"No!" clipped Aneido.

"Then what—?"

The general leveled a blunt forefinger at me. "We'll test this man here. You claim he's safe. Now we'll find out!"

I shrugged, slipped my hand into my pocket. "Anything you say, General." My fingers brushed the pulsator.

"Of course." Maurine motioned me to the empty chair. "Sit down, Fred."

I obeyed. With quick efficiency, she greased my head, then transferred the shorty's helmet to me. "I use a word association system for primary stimulus, General Aneido. Each word, read aloud to the subject, sets off a reaction pattern. The mental pictures that result are pro-

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jected through the artificial retina onto the screen. After that, it's just a matter of interpretation."

"I see," Aneido nodded grimly. He held out his hand. "Give me your word-list."

"What?"

"I'll read it myself, in whatever order I choose." The general's lips drew back in the same wolf-grin I'd seen the night before. "You see, I don't trust you, Doctor. Not after finding this man here. I'm taking no chances on collusion."

"I—I see. . . " Tiny lines of strain etched Maurine's face.

"The cards, please, Doctor."

"Yes—yes—of course." She handed it to him. I thought I could see her fingers trembling.

I gripped the pulsator.

"I'm ready, Doctor." There was an ugly glint in Aneido's eyes.

"Very well." Maurine's eyes were on the projectoscope's control panel.

She clicked the knob.

It was as if someone had strung a gong in the top of my head—more startling than painful. My temples pulsed and throbbed.

"Mother," clipped Aneido.

A white-haired woman's face flashed on the screen—the same face that had come when I read the word *mother* to Maurine.

For an instant I stared, while more associational images centering on the woman flashed past. Then, shifting, I stole a glance past the screen, to the control board.

Maurine hadn't moved. Her hand still rested on the knob.

But it was turned left, not right. . . .

VII

I LOOKED out of the window of Fred Caudel's apartment, down into the street.

There was the usual traffic. Over to the right, a Security man lounged in a doorway, cleaning his fingernails.

I swung round and peered left.

Another loiterer with "Security" written all over him leaned against a thil-shop window, scanning the news-reader inside.

Fred Caudel's time was running out.

I took a light-bath and changed clothes, then went into the kitchen and scrambled together a quick lunch of sliced canna and gesk-meat sandwiches, washed down with a tube of foamy purple Venusian yar-beer.

By the time I'd finished, a third Security man was standing talking to the first.

Leaving the apartment, I went downstairs and peeked out the building's rear entrance.

Security had it covered, too.

I went on down another flight of stairs to the base level and hunted up the climatizer room.

A young husky looked up as I came in. He had a big brindle cat on his lap. The spray of blue pockmarks along one side of his face said he wouldn't make any more space-trips; probably that was why he was here now, looking after a second-rate apartment building for a living.

He said, "Hi, Mr. Caudel."

"Hi," I grinned back. "Look, a friend of mine with Security asked me to check up on something. Where's the trap-door down here?"

"The trap-door?" The husky looked blank.

"Yes. All these old buildings have shafts that go down to refuge tunnels. They dug 'em back during the Chaos, when they were afraid the atomic wars on Earth might spread to Luna."

"Oh." The caretaker scratched the back of the cat's head absently. "Yeah, I guess I know what you mean."

He got up, sliding the cat to the floor, and led me back to the stairway. "Here. Is this what you're talking about?"

It was a manhole, set in the floor behind the stairs.

I scraped the rim clean with my foot. "Let's see if we can get the cover off."

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"Sure. There's a ring, see?" He bent, heaved. The lid came free.

I looked down into the black shaft. There was a metal ladder set into the wall. "That's it, all right."

"That's all you wanted?"

"That's all," I nodded. "Come on up to my place and have a drink. You can put the lid back later."

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Caudel."

He followed me up the stairs. I brought out my pulsator under cover of my tab-card. When he stepped through the doorway ahead of me, I touched him with it.

Five minutes later I was back at the manhole, a young husky with a blue-pocked face. Fred Caudel lay snoring on his own bed upstairs.

I LOWERED myself into the shaft and slid the manhole cover shut above me, then descended the metal ladder. It went down a long way—fifty feet or more, as nearly as I could figure. At the bottom I felt my way around the shaft wall till I found the thick, lead-sheathed door.

It had a lever handle instead of a lock. I opened it and stepped out into the cold, greenish glow of a radiation lamp set in a wall bracket. The distant gleam of other lamps marked a broad passage-way that stretched off both to right and left—the last, half-forgotten relic of a terror long dead.

I trotted left through the tunnel's sifting dust till my legs began to tire, then got out my com-set and sat down against the wall beneath one of the cold-ly-glowing lamps.

This time the duty man gave me Zero without question.

"Yes, Four-four?"

I said, "The trouble's started, Zero. The real trouble."

"What do you mean, Four-four?" The words were calm, but his voice had a raw edge.

"You remember that I told you a woman might be the key to this whole business—all Project X, both segments A and B?"

"Yes."

"She's developed an outfit that picks your thoughts right out of your mind. It reacts as spontaneously as your brain does. So far as I can see, there's no way to beat it."

"Does Security know about it?"

"Aneido himself. That's why he came to Luna. He'd have caught me for sure if the woman hadn't tricked him."

"She . . . tricked him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

There was a moment of silence. Then Zero asked, "Is it possible she's a sympathizer, Four-four?"

"No. Definitely not."

"Perhaps she knows more about the personality you're currently wearing than you do, and was afraid for him—what he might reveal about himself."

"It could be."

More silence.

I said, "There's more, Zero. She's figured out what's happened to the shorties. All of it."

I could hear him suck in breath. "Then—Four-four, you're on the ground. What do you recommend?"

I grunted. "I'm afraid it's not my day for recommending. For once, I can't see any angle."

"Four-four . . ."

I waited.

"Could you route this woman to The Center? By the end of the next cycle?"

I twisted sharply. "What—?"

Zero's voice was grim, savage. "I know it's going to rush you. But this crisis—there's only one answer. We've got to revise our whole timetable, push it ahead. Getting the woman's a major step."

I was breathing too fast. "What good would that do? There's bound to be plans for her gadget on file in a dozen places. We can't get them all. And Aneido—"

"Aneido may prove to be the least of our worries," Zero cut in on me harshly.

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And then, after a pause: "The tests on Process Q are completed. It's ready for use."

"Process Q?" I frowned and ran my thumb along the com-set. "That's new to me. What is it?"

ZERO chuckled. His voice had lost some of its tension. "It's our road to power, Four-four. Our top 'top secret.'"

"But—what . . .?"

"It will . . . replace . . . the general."

I gripped the com-set. "Zero! Is this a joke?"

"Hardly." He clipped the word. "We haven't any choice, Four-four. Not after what you've told me. So . . . General Aneido will be treated by Process Q. He becomes our first non-experimental subject."

I grouped for words. "But how?"

"You know where he's located, don't you?"

"Of course. We've got a plant in the next apartment."

"Good. The equipment can be set up there. We'll rush Nine-seven in from our Luna lab to take care of the technical side of it. You can pick him up at the secret station."

I leaned back against the wall. Talking suddenly seemed like a waste of time.

"Route the general to The Center, also," Zero continued. "That's why I want the woman here. She can demonstrate her apparatus on him. We'll need all the information we can drain out of him to put this thing over. And Four-four . . ."

"Yes."

A little of the grimness left Zero's voice. "This woman—was I right, before? Was she the one you . . . used to know?"

I shifted. "Does it matter?"

"I think it does." He was Zero, my friend, now; not the chill, impersonal Zero who directed the far-flung affairs of the Society of Mechanists on every satellite and planet. "We need her, Four-four. We need her badly. But you still love her, and she's not one of us, so you'll be . . . tempted."

I stared down at the com-set's grillwork. "You know me awfully well, don't you, Zero?"

"Yes, I know you." He said it almost sadly. "I know you because I know myself, Four-four. It's that reckless, headstrong streak of yours that brought us together. I've got it, too."

"I hadn't noticed."

"Just don't let it get out of hand, Four-four. Not now, when we're so close to victory. The work you've done—the Society won't forget it. And once your sweetheart's here, you can be together."

I scuffed the dust of the passageway with my toe.

Zero said, "It's settled, then, Four-four. Process Q for Aneido; then route both him and the woman to The Center. Right?" His tone was brisk again, incisive.

I stared off through the darkness, down the long line of cold, green, glowing radiation lamps that marked the passage. The utter stillness pressed in on me.

The com-set buzzed. "Right, Four-four?" Zero prodded.

"Right," I answered dully.

"Zero out, then. . . ."

I kept on staring at the radiation lamps for a long, long time. . . .

VIII

ANOTHER cog-train thundered into the transit center. Brakes screamed. Couplings rattled.

Then the bars went down. Miners poured out of the pneumocars, yelling and laughing—thick-shouldered, heavy-chested men, in for a cycle or two or three here at the great port base.

Around the cycle, they came and they went . . . cog-trains and miners, up from the Mare Nubium fields and the Leibnitz Mountains; outbound for the pits at Schickard and the giant shaft south

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of Lacus Somniorum.

I leaned back in my seat and relaxed and watched Street Exit D. No one gave me a second glance. Blue pockmarks and stained brotex work clothes were too common.

A new crowd surged in from the street—more miners, outbound; girls from the thil-shops, down to see them off; a stray spaceman or two.

One of the girls stepped out of the rush; paused. A tall girl with tawny hair.

I got up and wandered over closer to her.

It was Narla Cherritt.

She was frowning and scanning the crowd. I drifted around beside her, as if I were looking for someone, too. She glanced at me, then turned away.

I said, "Zero," holding my voice low.

Her hands tightened convulsively on her purse. That was all. She didn't even look around at me again.

"Who are you looking for?"

"A—a fat man. He's short, with watery eyes—"

"John Raines?"

"Yes." Her lips trembled. "Where is he? I've got to find him—"

"Why?"

"He—he was to meet my contact here—"

"And your contact sent you instead?" I swore under my breath.

"No, no; my contact doesn't even know I'm here."

"What?"

"I'm telling the truth! Really I am! Raines—tried to help me once. And now—"

She broke off, lips stiff and quivering. Her knuckles were white against the purse.

"Raines hasn't come yet," I clipped. "If something's wrong, tell me. This may be the only chance you'll get."

Her head came round. She looked at me—a long, searching look. She was so pale I was afraid she was going to faint.

She whispered, "My contact—he's turned Raines in to Security! They'll be here any minute!"

"And you're a Mek." I said it bitterly. "Even if Heffner turns yellow, you'll carry on and save the day for the Society."

"No! That isn't it at all!" Tears brimmed her eyes. She bent her head quickly. "I'm not a Mechanist—not now. I'm doing this just for Mr. Raines . . . because he tried to help me. When Heffner finds out, he'll turn me in, too."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't.

"That funny little fat man! He said you couldn't be human and be a Mechanist, too—"

"He was right."

"Yes. I know that now. I've thought it through."

"I said, "I'll tell Raines that—"

The girl caught her breath.

I pivoted, following her eyes.

Uniformed Security men were filing through Street Exit D into the station.

I said, "Take it easy. They're looking for a fat man named Raines. They don't know us."

SECURITY men were pouring in through the other entrances now, forming a cordon. The station speaker boomed, "Attention! Stand by to have your papers checked! No one may leave the station until his papers have been examined!"

I slapped at the pockets of my current personality's stained brotex work clothes. There was a handkerchief, a tool-knife, a writer, a wad of crumpled credit notes and a few coins.

No identity papers.

The Security men began herding the station crowd into groups. A corporal and two privates bore down on the girl and me.

I moved in between them and Narla Cherritt. Out of the corner of my mouth I clipped, "Quick! Was Heffner your only contact? Did anyone else know you were a Mek?"

Her lips were white. "No. Just Heffner—"

"Then leave everything to me. Don't

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admit anything!"

The Security men closed in. The corporal snapped, "You two! Let's see your ID's!"

Narla fumbled in her purse.

I fell back a step. "What'sa matter? Can't a mono pick up a girl in a thil-shop any more without you lead-heads buttin' in?"

The corporal grabbed my hand and jerked it up, palm out. "Don't try to guff me! Not with a mitt soft as that! You're no mono!"

"And this wench never come out of no thil-shop, neither!" a private echoed.

The other private was circling. He grabbed my arms from behind, twisted them up in a break-lock. "Here! I got 'im!"

The corporal ran his hands over me! "So! No papers, huh?" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Take him along!"

"What about the wench?" It was the other private talking. "Her card looks all right."

"She's with him, ain't she? She goes, too."

"Hey, wait a minute!" I tried to twist free of the break-lock.

The corporal slammed me in the chest with the heel of his hand so hard I would have fallen if the private hadn't been holding me. "On your way!"

They shoved us towards the exit—through the cordon, out of the station.

Big vansters were waiting—a whole row of them. They had tailgate doors of heavy grating. Our captors hurried us down the line to the last one, parked close to the high fence of the cog-train yard. A dozen sullen-faced prisoners were already aboard. They were shifty-eyed specimens; petty criminals, mostly, or ship-jumpers from the cargo fleet.

The private let go of my arms. "Up, you!" The corporal was already lifting Narla aboard.

I swung my hands round, windmill fashion.

"Go on! Get up!"

"You ever tried to climb with your arms twisted half off?" I snarled back. I reached into my pocket, palmed a wadded credit note, brought out my handkerchief, and swabbed my neck.

"Listen, you!"

"I'm going! I'm going!" I stuffed the handkerchief back into my pocket, grasped the door-frame at lock level, and swung up, cramming the wadded bill into the bolt-slot with my thumb.

AN OFFICER clipped, "That's enough for this load. You men can ride guard." He turned to our group, the prisoners. "There'll be a man with a paragun on the roof. His orders are to shoot to kill if you start anything."

I stole a glance back at the bolt-slot. The wadded bill didn't show.

The tailgate grating clanged shut. The private who'd checked Narla's papers jumped on outside.

I crowded next to her. "Did he keep your card?"

"No."

"Then get ready."

The vanster jerked, lumbered forward. Turning right around the end of the fence, it jounced over the tracks.

I craned to one side. Ahead, a cog-train engine puffed and snorted, just short of our right-of-way.

I slipped out the tool-knife and flicked open the thin blade, then leaned against the door-grating, holding the private's eyes with mine. "What'sa matter, anyhow? What brought all this on?" I slid the knife-blade between door and frame as I spoke, wedging the point into the bolt-slot, prying and twisting.

The private turned to spit. "Trouble. Mek trouble."

"But we ain't Meks—" I pried harder.

"Tell that to Headquarters."

The bolt clicked back.

I started breathing again.

The noise of the cog-train engine had risen over the rattling and jouncing of the vanster. We were abreast it now. It towered over us.

"Narla . . ."

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"Yes—"

I kicked the tailgate door—hard.

It slammed back, carrying the private outside with it.

I was jumping before he hit the ground. When he tried to raise up, I kicked him in the face.

Narla Cherritt jumped after me, tripped and fell. I caught her up bodily and ran for the engine. Over my shoulder, I glimpsed the man on top of the vanster swinging round his paragun.

Before he could fire, the cog-train was between us. I raced back along the engine to the cab's ladder and clawed my way up it.

The engineer turned in his seat as I topped the floorsill. I shoved the tool-knife at him and snarled, "Get it rolling! Fast!"

He jerked levers. The cog-train jolted forward, picking up speed.

I let the girl down and looked back. The vanster was a mess. Prisoners were running every which way, and the Security men didn't seem to know quite what to do about it.

We dropped off the engine at the next crossway and left the yards. After that there was an autotran, more walking, another autotran, and finally the Quiverna.

Narla Cherritt's face was still drawn and pale. She looked up at the building as if it were paradise molded in vitraline and chromoid. Her words came out stumbling and ragged: "I—I don't know what to say. . . ."

"Then don't say it." I pushed open the autotran's door. "It's time I got busy on something else."

"Of course." She got out quickly.

I said, "One detail—don't worry about Heffner. He won't bother you again," then shoved the autotran's tracer ahead fast in an aimless pattern.

Maybe there were tears on her cheeks. Or it could have been the way the light fell as the autotran pulled away.

I stopped off at the nearest voco station and dialed Heffner's number. He answered in seconds.

I said, "Mr. Heffner, this is Security, Base Headquarters unit. We've got that man Raines. We want you to come down and identify him right away."

He could hardly wait to hang up. I brought the autotran back around to the Quiverna port and left it, taking my own stand by the fabric shop where I'd bought the harrah cloth earlier.

Heffner came out of the Quiverna's entrance in less than two minutes. He headed straight for the autotran I'd just left.

I waited till he was almost there, rolling my pulsator back and forth between my thumb and fingers. He didn't even waste a glance on me.

When he reached for the door-handle, I stepped forward.

I was in the way when he turned in his seat to close the door behind him. He stared at me blankly. "What—?"

Crowding into the autotran, I said, "This is a little present from Narla Cherritt."

I waited till I saw the fear leap in his eyes before I touched him. . . .

IX

NINE-SEVEN said, "Yes, Mr. Heffner; we're ready."

I looked at my new face in the wall-mirror. Heffner's face. There were the beady little black eyes, the pinched features, the sallow parchment skin, the balding head.

Mine, now—for a while.

Nine-seven cleared his throat. "Mr. Heffner—"

"Yes, I heard you." I gave myself a wry grin and turned to the maze of equipment set up in Heffner's bedroom. We'd pushed the furniture back against the walls to make room for a tank some seven feet long and a row of smaller tanks that connected with it. Beside that stood a metal case with a hinged lid; it looked something like a twentieth century burial casket. The wall that adjoined Aneido's livingroom was lined with a whole row of devices whose

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names I didn't even know, and there was enough cable coiling here and there to rewire the building.

I said, "Look, I know the technical end of this thing is none of my business, but I'd at least like to get a little of the outline."

The corners of Nine-seven's mouth pulled up, as if he had to plan to be amused. "Certainly, Mr. Heffner. I'll explain as we go along." He bent to straighten out a cable. He did it with a neat precision that said order meant a lot to him. So did his appearance, for that matter—every hair in place, clothes that might as well have been a uniform, the bleak lack of color of his face and voice.

There were a lot like him in the Society.

He straightened again. "The first step is the hypnojector. Have you ever used it?"

"No."

"It amounts to an inversion of the perceptoscope. You won't have any trouble understanding it.

He stepped over and got the perceptoscope going. Slowly, the screen cleared and the image was gradually sharpened.

General Aneido sat in the same foam-ex chair he'd occupied when I looked in on him and Maurine. As before, he was clicking microbook frames through the reader.

Nine-seven moved over to the next machine. "Be quiet now, please. This device has both audio and video elements."

He turned a dial. A faint, pulsing, monotonous drone arose from the machine, and he shot an anxious glance at the perceptoscope's scanner screen, then whispered, "We have to bleed the drone in carefully. If it came up too fast, it might catch the subject's attention."

I nodded. On the screen, Aneido continued his reading undisturbed.

Nine-seven turned another dial. A small screen at the top of the hypnojector lighted up.

AT FIRST I couldn't see any image on it. Then I blinked. There was movement *without* image—a sort of seething, as if sand were simmering slowly in water.

Nine-seven pointed to the perceptoscope. Aneido was blinking, too. He rubbed his eyes.

Nine-seven turned the audio dial up a notch. The drone grew louder. The seconds ticked by, and Aneido blinked some more and shook his head. Then his lids lowered and stayed closed. Slowly, his heavy chin sank onto his chest.

Nine-seven turned up the dial another notch and whispered, "Now . . . the vocal channel!" He moved a lever, picked up what looked like a voco mouth unit, and spoke into it in a low, gently coaxing voice, "Sleep, Aneido . . . sleep sleep . . . a deep sleep . . . a sleep so deep you cannot waken."

I looked at the perceptoscope's scanner screen. General Aneido was shifting uneasily. He slumped lower in his chair.

Nine-seven kept on talking, "You cannot waken, Aneido. You cannot. You've never slept so deep a sleep before. Now you can't even lift your hand. Try, Aneido. Try to lift your hand. . . ."

The general's right hand twitched. His body twisted. But the hand didn't rise.

"Such a deep sleep. . . ." Nine-seven whispered. "So deep, so deep. Your muscles are like water. . . ."

Aneido's head sagged to one side. His heavy body had a sodden look.

"Try to lift your hand again, Aneido. Try hard! You can lift it now. . . ."

Even in the screen, I could see the beads of sweat start on Aneido's face. His body heaved. Slowly, shakily, the right hand came up.

"Try to get up, Aneido. Stand up! Stand up!"

Aneido gripped the arms of the foam-ex chair. The muscles along his jaw stood out. Like a statue coming to life, he rose from the chair, swaying.

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"Open your eyes, Aneido. . . ."

The lined lids lifted. The eyes stared, blank and glassy.

"Aneido! Listen carefully! The Somex has another plot afoot, but you can smash it! There's a man in the next apartment who knows about it. He'll help you. Go to him. Listen to him. Obey him! Go to the next apartment now, Aneido—apartment seventy-three-three! You can smash the Mechanists if you do! You'll have power—more power than you ever dreamed of! Go! Go to seven-three-three! The door is open. . . ."

Aneido was already moving. Shuffling, eyes glazed, head sunk down between his heavy shoulders, he lumbered across the frame towards his own apartment's door.

Nine-seven pivoted. "Quick! Open the door!"

I ran into the livingroom and jerked the door open, stepping aside and behind it.

The veldrene carpet whispered. Through the crack along the hinges, I saw General Aneido appear in the hall. Like an automaton, he turned when he reached our door and shuffled past me into the room.

"This way, Aneido," Nine-seven said softly. He backed towards the bedroom doorway. "This way. In here. . . ."

Dog-like, Aneido followed him.

Nine-seven reached the side of the metal casket. He lifted the lid. "Here, Aneido. Lie here. . . ."

Aneido reached the threshold of the bedroom and stood swaying. His head rolled from side to side.

"Aneido!" Nine-seven said sharply. "This way, Aneido—"

Abruptly, Aneido stopped swaying. His head came up from between his shoulders. His right hand lifted in a quick arc. "Another time, Mek."

He said it almost gently, but it was the same deep voice I'd heard before. It had iron in it. I didn't need to see his face or the gun I knew he held in his hand. That voice, and Nine-seven's grey lips, were enough.

"Mek ego!" Aneido chuckled mirthlessly. "There's nothing like it!"

Nine-seven's Adam's apple moved up and down. His eyes had a white panic-rim around the iris.

I slid my pulsator out of my pocket and stepped from behind the door, barely breathing.

"Security found out about your hypnotic gadget over a year ago," the general observed conversationally. "Our psych staff drummed the whole drone-and-blur business into our heads till we could recognize them in our sleep."

Nine-seven's eyes flicked this way and that. In a tremulous voice he said, "I'm afraid I'm going to be sick," and leaned against the metal casket.

I took a slow, silent step forward. Then another.

ANEIDO was studying Nine-seven now. "You're Gervault, aren't you? Doctor Hercule Gervault, the top biochemist of the Venusian colonies, till you disappeared." He shook his massive head. "Why did you do it, Gervault? What is there about your lunatic Society of Mechanists that makes men like you throw away your lives?"

Nine-seven's face was a sweat-splotched mask. "For God's sake—"

"And what has God got to do with it? You Mechanists don't believe in God."

I took another step.

"You're frightened, Gervault; that's all that's wrong. But you don't need to be. . . ." Aneido's voice dropped a note. "You'd be more use to me alive and free than in a cell—if you'd just talk."

I took still another step. I was close now—almost close enough. . . .

Aneido said, "Your friend behind me could save his neck, too, Gervault. A place on the budget council's better than a grave."

My belly muscles convulsed. I lunged by pure reflex.

Only Aneido was already side-stepping and whirling. It was a pretty piece

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of footwork, faster than his bulk gave me any reason to expect. The muzzle of his paragun whipped round. And I was still clawing for balance.

Nine-seven slammed the casket lid.

For the fraction of a second Aneido's smooth flow of motion broke. I rammed the pulsator against him.

He went down like a falling zanat.

I leaned against the bedroom doorjamb, panting. I could hardly hold onto the pulsator. Nine-seven ran for the bathroom. He'd meant it when he'd said he was going to be sick.

When he came out, his hair was slicked smooth again, and his mouth had the old precise set.

He looked down at Aneido as if the general were a biological specimen on the dissecting board. "You shouldn't have done that, Four-four."

"I shouldn't have done what?"

"Used your pulsator. I don't know what effect it will have on Process Q."

I just stared at him.

He said, "We'd better get to work. Close the outside door."

I obeyed. When I came back, he was busy stripping Aneido.

"Now help me lift him into the matrix chamber."

Together we carried the naked general over and heaved him into the metal casket. Nine-seven adjusted clamps to hold him, closed the lid, and began twisting dials. "Do you know what a pantograph is?" His voice was dry, professorial.

"You mean one of those affairs they use sometimes to scale maps and pictures?"

"Correct. All this—" Nine-seven indicated the sprawling mass of equipment"—constitutes a sort of electro-biochemical pantograph. It duplicates and conditions cell structures."

"What?"

"All living matter is made up of cells and their products. Schleiden and Schwann established that as far back as the nineteenth century. A hundred and fifty years later, Kronkite put forward his theory of cellular weight. As simply as I can put it—" Nine-seven was definitely condescending now—"his hypothesis was that just as different elements have different atomic weights, so different types of cells—cellements, he called them—have different cellular weights."

I shuffled my feet. "But doesn't that deny—"

"It denies all sorts of things. They don't count, so far as this project is concerned. The only part important to us is Kronkite's idea that the weights were subject to change, through metabolism. Complex cellements break down into simple by Katabolism, liberating energy. Simple cellements build up to complex by anabolism, using the energy supplied by catabolism or drawn from such outside sources as sunlight."

I threw up my hands. "I fell off. I fell off a long way back."

Nine-seven laughed. His condescension was thick enough to slice. "Most laymen would."

"But what are you trying to do?"

"I thought you'd guessed." Nine-seven checked indicators. "I'm duplicating Aneido."

"You're . . . duplicating . . . Aneido?"

"That's correct." He indicated the seven-foot tank. "In there."

I LOOKED at the tank. Then I looked at Nine-seven. Then I looked back at the tank again. Then I went over to the bed and sat down.

"Kronkite's theory is the key," Nine-seven explained. "Once you isolate your basic cellements, you can metabolize them according to any predetermined pattern by electrosynthesis. This special cymograph—" he nodded to it—"charts cell structures electronically. When we put Aneido in here—" he tapped the matrix chamber—"he became our pattern. And even though the human body is made up of more than a million million cells, the protoplasmic synthesizers—those small tanks connected to the large one—are evolving a twin of him in the

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Q-tank at this moment."

"And his mind?" I queried.

"The mind's patterns are set by experiences and conditionings," Nine-seven declared flatly. "Van Wagnen conducted a series of experiments in 2004 that proved that all perceptions—that is, all outside stimuli an organism becomes aware of—have a physiological effect. Everything that happens to a person speeds or retards the metabolism of the cellular structures in the various affected areas of the brain and nervous system." He paused and eyed me. "Do you follow me?"

I shook my head. "No. But go on anyhow. It all sounds very impressive."

Nine-seven scowled and his lips drew thin. He worked for a moment at the matrix chamber's dials, then straightened. "I'm merely saying that perception is individual. Once a metabolic pattern is set up in your brain structure—whether it's by an outside stimulus or by Process Q—your understanding and mental processes depend more on the cells and their relationship to each other than they do on your actually having undergone specific experiences."

I nodded slowly, but Nine-seven apparently still wasn't pleased with my expression. He said, "You can check what I'm saying by the work the neurologists did with the Rahm stimulator back around the middle of the twentieth century. They found that an electrical charge, focused on key points of the cerebral cortex, would produce the same perceptions as actual stimuli taken in through the usual sensory channels. In other words, if you duplicate a man's cell structure with sufficient precision, the facsimile will not only live and breathe; it will have precisely the same capacity, knowledge and background of experience as the man who served as model."

The speech must have winded him. He turned back to his checking of dials and indicators, and readjusted the flow valves of the protoplasmic synthesizers.

I waited for him to look around at me again, then said, "I'm going to surprise you, Nine-seven. I think I *do* understand what you're talking about. The only thing is—what good will it do to produce a copy of the general? One of him's bad enough; why make another?"

Nine-seven leaned back against the Q-tank. "Would it clarify the situation if I told you we're not going to make the duplicate exactly like him?"

"You mean—"

"I mean that since mental processes are a mere matter of metabolic conditioning, we can control our facsimile's outlook. There's a specific thought pattern common to all Mechanists, and antithetical to the FedGov's nonsensical pseudo-democratic notions."

"Then—"

"Yes!" The corners of Nine-seven's mouth pulled up. It was a leer, more than a smile. A tremor of excitement crept into his voice. "By focusing electrical charges on the proper areas in the frontal lobe, we can give our carbon copy the mind of a Mechanist! He'll have Aneido's personality, his background; but all his sympathies will be with us!"

I sat without speaking for a long, long time. The room seemed to close in on me, and the light glinting on the equipment hurt my eyes, and the cables all looked like hangman's nooses. I hardly heard Nine-seven rattling on:

"Think of it, Mr. Heffner! Think of it! A member of the Society in charge of Security! It's worth all the years of work it's taken. And this is just the first step! We'll replace the FedGov's key men, all of them—the executives, the leaders. It means complete victory—"

I said, "It means the end of the hu-

"What?" Nine-seven reared back as man race."

if I'd hit him in the face.

"You heard me!" I lashed. "Man's climb up out of the mud stops here. Evolution's a closed chapter, as of this moment."

"Mr. Heffner!"

I kept on talking, "This is what Anei-

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do's been looking for—the thing all the tyrants in history have dreamed of! It's worse than Maurine Burton's projectoscope, even. That just screens deviation and free thought. This stops them before they start."

Nine-seven stood very straight, a bright spot of angry color on each cheek. "I don't think Zero would care for such talk, Mr. Heffner." Pluto's ice-packs were warmer than his voice. "The Society of Mechanists is dedicated to science and progress. The barrier is the FedGov's insistence on catering to the prejudices and emotions of the mob; the authorities' refusal to accept the counsel of superior minds—"

"Quit trying to recruit me," I grunted. I got up off the bed and walked over to the door.

Nine-seven's nostrils quivered. "Zero will hear of it if I don't get your full co-operation, Mr. Heffner!"

I turned on him. "Get on with it! Zero's going to hear plenty—from me, about this whole idea, just as soon as we get to The Center. The quicker we get the job done, the quicker we can go. Besides, it may take me time to pick up Burton. . . ."

X

I KEPT moving the thil-glass around on the bar in small concentric circles. Each time, the circle got smaller, till finally I was jiggling the glass on a point. Then I'd take a drink and set the glass down and start over again. It was funny, though. The circles always got smaller; they always went in, not out.

Someone put another coin in the musicord. A brassy-voiced female began singing a song with a wailing chorus line about, "There's a woman for ev-ery ma-a-an. . . ."

The shifty-eyed weasel next to me at the bar said, "That's what you need, pal. A woman. That thil's gonna get you if you keep swillin' it down so fast. An' I got just the gal for you—a honey, one of those little numbers fresh in from Europa. . . ."

The bartender said, "Shut up, you moron. This guy's got troubles." He swabbed away my latest rings. "Another thil, mister?"

I said thickly, "Yeah. Another thil."

The bartender poured more white murder into my glass. "If it's a woman, mister, she ain't worth it. Believe me—I know."

"Like hell you know." I gulped the thil.

"Have it your way," he shrugged, "only that punk was right. You're takin' this stuff too fast."

He moved off to wait on someone else. I glanced at the clock.

The pickup for The Center was due to leave in less than an hour now.

I went back over to the voco and tried Maurine's office again, then her apartment. Neither answered.

At the Electro-Neural Testing section at Humanics Research a man's voice said, "Her work cycle's over, sir. You'd better call her home."

"She isn't there."

"Well, you might try Fred Caudel. . . ."

I rapped my glass for another thil. The bartender looked at me, then put his bottle back. "No more for you."

I cursed him and went out into the street.

There was a voco station at the corner. For the dozenth time, I dialed the number of Maurine's apartment.

This trip, a man answered on the second ring. His voice held a clipped, official note. "Who's calling, please?"

I thumbed down the button and headed for the nearest autotran port. I ran the tracer a block past Maurine's building.

A black Security tran stood at the curb. Loiterers were beginning to gather about the building entrance, craning and talking.

I ran the autotran around the corner, got out, and walked back.

Another Security tran drew up just

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as I came up. Two Security agents hurried Fred Caudel out of it and into the building.

Some of the bolder loiterers followed the three inside. I drifted in, and up the stairs.

The Security men were in Maurine's apartment. The door was open. I could hear Fred Caudel talking.

CAUDEL said, "Yes, I guess she must be a Mek, all right. Not that I realized it till just now, of course. But when I saw her with that Raines last cycle—"

A woman's voice rose shrilly, "You bet she's a Mek! And so's John Raines, the dog! They've been playing around together for months—"

I stepped past the doorway, glancing into the apartment as I went by.

As I suspected, the furious voice belonged to Raines' scrawny secretary.

A Security man clipped, "All right, that's enough. We'll take your statements later. What we want now is this Burton woman. Get out a general order. . . ."

I went back down the stairs, made for the nearest voco, and called Nine-seven at our secret pickup station.

He sounded tense and angry. "Where are you, Four-four? It's almost time—"

I said, "Burton's in trouble. Someone's turned her in to Security as one of us."

"But she isn't!"

"That didn't stop Security from putting out a general order on her. They claim she's run off with one of our people here, a fat fool named Raines."

"Oh." I could almost hear the wheels turn in Nine-seven's head. "Four-four. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Perhaps she has."

"I doubt it."

"But she could have."

"Could she?" I scowled into my voco. 'In the first place, she loathes Raines. In the second, I left Raines stashed in an empty cage-tank not too long ago. It was built for a zanat. So far as I know, there's no way he could have gotten out."

"Oh." Nine-seven held another conference with himself. Finally he asked, "What do you propose to do then, Four-four?"

I traced patterns on the voco with my thumbnail. "I've got my orders. Zero said to bring her in. I'm going to do it."

"Four-four. . . ." There was a new preciseness about the way Nine-seven said it.

"I'm listening."

"Zero briefed me about your . . . relationship . . . with this Burton woman when he assigned me to come here from the laboratory."

I didn't say anything.

"You're notoriously headstrong, Four-four. Zero told me so."

"He knew it when he assigned me."

"But he didn't know this situation would arise. For us to stay here endangers the entire project."

"I've got my orders."

"Your orders aren't that strict! We can get along without the woman if we have to. This is sheer wilfulness on your part—an immature emotional reaction."

"You can call it that."

"But the pickup—"

Maybe it was the thil talking. I said, "To hell with the pickup. And to hell with you, too. Take Aneido and go, if you want to. I've got a job to finish here."

I clicked off the voco and hit the street again.

The Security trans were still parked in front of Maurine's apartment. I took off in the opposite direction. When I came to an autotran, I grabbed it and ran the tracer over a route through the old first port district, down past the place where I'd left Raines, the *Chamber of Horrors*.

The Ionian quontab was still—or maybe it was 'again'—beating the percussor with its shoulder-hammers.

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The redhead stood by the doorway, taking admissions and ballyhooing the exhibits.

I left the autotran and went into a thil-shop across the street.

THERE was a woman behind the bar here. I ordered a thil, then jerked my head in the redhead's direction. "Know her?"

"Her?" The barmaid's eyes grew scornful. "Yeah, I know her."

"Has she got a voco?"

"I guess so."

I leaned on the bar, and twisted a ten-credit note around my fingers. "She's an old . . . acquaintance . . . of mine," I confided. "I'd like to play a little joke on her. Would you help?"

The barmaid eyed the ten-credit note. "What do I have to do?"

I grinned. "Just call her on the voco. Say, 'Honey, I thought you ought to know. There's more between your Fred and that Burton woman than you think there is. I can see them from here now.' "

"That's all?"

"That's all. When you've said it, just hang up."

The barmaid reached for the ten credits. Her smile belonged on a happy cat. I followed her to the voco, and she spun the dial.

Across the street, the redhead in the too-tight jacket stopped in the middle of her spiel. She turned, tilting her head as if listening, then disappeared inside the building. A moment later I heard her voice on the voco.

My barmaid followed the script to the letter. She even added a long, low whistle after she'd said, "I can see them from here now."

We went back to the bar and I had another thil.

Over at the *Chamber of Horrors*, customers began to file out. Then the woman herself reappeared in the doorway, dragged the quontab from its stand and carried it inside, closing the door behind her.

Perhaps three minutes passed. I shifted and rolled my glass between my palms.

Abruptly, the *Chamber's* door opened once more. The redhead came out. She wore street clothes now. Locking the door after her, she walked quickly away.

I followed.

Her route took us straight to the deserted wastes of the first port. Cutting around ahead of her, I ducked into a ramping scar that gave me a clear view of the whole area.

My quarry headed directly for an abandoned loading tower. Hurrying up the ramp, she opened the door at the second level and went in.

Again, there was a waiting period—of seconds, this time, instead of minutes. Then the redhead came out again. She paused uncertainly atop the ramp and looked about, while I cowered in my pit. Finally, with a last nervous glance, she walked down the ramp once more and hurried back towards the *Chamber* neighborhood along the same route by which she'd come.

I waited till she was well out of sight, then climbed the ramp myself.

The door at the top wasn't even locked. Pulsator in hand, I slid inside.

It was too dark to see much. Directly in front of me swayed six baleful, luminous eyes. They were so close I could almost have reached out and touched them.

I rocked back flat against the wall and kicked the door open. Light streamed in.

The windowless room was long and narrow—hardly more than a hall. A grillwork cage on wheels stood just clear of the door. The six swaying eyes thrust up through the top. They were on stalks, and they belonged to a full-grown Martian dotol. The creature's clawed tentacles moved like grass streamers in flowing water between the side slats, reaching towards me.

Fortunately, they couldn't reach far enough.

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BEYOND the cage was an open space and a sodden, blubbering lump of flesh that was John Raines. Behind him stood a second cage. This one contained a slimy monster I'd never seen before. It had mandibles that looked as if they could tear off a pound of flank steak at a time.

Beyond it, far back against the rear wall, stood Maurine.

She didn't say anything. From the hollow horror in her eyes, I doubted that she could.

There was a broken chair in my corner. I prodded it at the dotol.

The clawed tentacles hooked into it in a lashing frenzy. I backed out the door, pulling the cage after me, letting the dotol's own tentacles serve as ropes.

Out on the ramp, the cage began to roll. By the time it hit the bottom it was going so fast the wheels hardly touched. Then it turned over, and the latch broke open, and the dotol spilled out. I didn't worry about it; no dotol could last more than a few minutes in full Lunar light.

I went back in after John Raines.

He hardly looked human. His face was puffed till I almost had to hunt to find his eyes, and blood was running out from under his nails from trying to tear a hole in the floor. One of the plastic slats in his coat had come through the collar and was gouging his neck raw, but he didn't seem to notice it.

I pushed him over against a side wall, out of the way, and turned to the second cage.

Behind me, a voice said, "Keep right on going, Heffner."

I pivoted, not too quickly.

Fred Caudel stood in the doorway. He had a service blaster in his hand.

"That voco call trick was smart—but not smart enough," he said tightly. "Security's right behind me, but I've still got time to pick up my insurance—" his eyes touched Maurine—"and run for it. So just keep backing

[*Turn page*]

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till that ariskon in the cage can reach you. You, too, Raines!"

Raines' puffed face came up. He looked dazedly at Caudel and began to blubber again.

"Go on! Back up!" Caudel's lean face wasn't handsome any more.

Behind me, the mandibles were clacking.

I didn't move.

"You, Raines!"

Raines' face looked like a twisted lump of grey dough. He threw one horrified look at the monstrosity in the cage—and lunged full-tilt at Caudel.

The blaster roared. I could see Raines' body jerk, but his bulk carried him the rest of the distance. He crashed into Caudel. They went sprawling out the door together and rolled down the ramp outside.

They rolled all the way to the dotol's broken cage. The clawed tentacles whipped round them.

I snatched up Caudel's fallen blaster and ran down and killed the dotol, though by then it was too late to do any good. Then I went back and killed the creature with the mandibles.

Maurine still stood pressed flat back against the wall. She hadn't even spoken.

I slapped her face, hard.

Her hand came up to her cheek in a tremulous, bewildered gesture. She looked at me as if I were an apparition sprung to life that very moment. Then she began to sob.

I had to carry her out.

Down at the bottom of the ramp, I stopped and stripped off Raines' coat with the plastic strips, then headed back into the rabbit-warren tangle of the old port district. We reached the first buildings just as a Security tran spun down the street with its siren screaming.

I pulled Maurine into a doorway. She was still sobbing. I held her close, and my throat got hot and dry and tight. I wished I had a shot of thil.

Then we were on our way again, block after block, till at last we stumbled into the Society's secret station.

The pickup was still there.

I wished I had a whole bottle. . . .

XI

FOR a long moment I lay motionless on the bed, staring down at my own body.

The tech grinned. "Feel good to get back into your own skin, Mr. Lord?"

"You'll never know." I ran my hands over my bare belly and down my legs.

"I tried to keep you in good condition—enriched flow in the nutritor, massage every cycle, electrodyne stimulation."

I flexed my muscles. They were smooth and firm, my bones well-fleshed. "I can see. You did a good job."

"Thanks, Mr. Lord." The tech began laying out my clothes. "I hated to wake you, but Zero sent up the orders himself. There's some kind of a meeting. They want you down there just as soon as you can dress and eat."

"I figured it that way." I got up and went into the light-bath and turned the beam to high frequency. It made my whole body pulse and tingle, drove out the last stiffness. I stayed there a long while, relaxing.

The careman had gone when I got out. I put on the clean clothes and went down to the lift.

The operator nodded politely to me. "Welcome back, Mr. Lord." And then, with his eyes on the board: "You're to have breakfast in one of the private units—B, I believe it is."

"In other words, Zero doesn't want me to talk to anyone till after the meeting. Is that it?"

"I wouldn't know about that, sir." He kept his eyes on the board.

The waiter who took my order in Unit B was polite and noncommittal, too.

I went over to the narrow slot-window and looked out across the dark, bleak ball of astroidal rock we called The Center. The Dekktordi process that gave us our thin artificial atmosphere had pitted the stone with holes and

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pockmarks. Down by the cave-mouth that served as a disguised foot-entrance, glinting worms of energy from the hidden mind-shield licked and crawled and darted, probing endlessly for a haven in some human brain.

I cursed.

The waiter came back. I left the window for a table and chewed my way through toka with grenamere sauce, fresh berskal eggs and bacon.

The squawker blared. "Alan?" It was Zero's voice.

I flipped the switch. "I'm coming down now." I drank the last of my coffee, wiped my mouth, and headed for the conference room.

It looked more like a court than a meeting. Three members of the Council were present, plus Heffner—in control of his own mind now—and Nine-seven. Their mouths were stiff and set.

Zero sat at the head of the table. He was the only one who nodded to me. "Sit down, Alan." He gestured to the chair beside him.

I said, "I'd rather stand. What's all this about?"

Zero ran his fingers through his short grey hair. "Just a few questions, Alan." His gaunt face was a trifle flushed.

"Questions?" I laughed out loud. "You mean charges, don't you?"

"Now, Alan—"

I GRIPPED the back of a chair. "Don't guff me! You mean charges—charges from people like Heffner, there, who turned me in to Security to save his own skin. Or Nine-seven, or Gervault, or whatever his name is, who flubbed up on Aneido and then screamed bloody murder because I had to use my pulsator on him."

"Alan!"

"Alan, hell!" I smashed my fist into my palm. "I'm sick of this business! When there's a dirty job, or a hard one, I'm the man you yell for. Then, when I play my shots the way I see them, you throw rules at me and tell me I'm stiff-necked and headstrong. Or even human." I glared them down, one after the other. "All right, so I'm headstrong. Sometimes I even forget I'm a Mechanist and act like a man instead. Like this time. I took over the minds of two members, against regulations—and both of them turned out to be traitors, even if one of them is still sitting at this table. I knocked out Aneido—and I brought him in. I tried to get relief from duty for personal reasons—and I carried out every last detail of my assignment, even when it meant twisting a knife in my own belly."

"Please, please—"

"Shut up!" I snarled. "You've got Aneido, you've got Burton, you've got the plastic out of Baines' coat—and that's all you're going to get! Find some other damn fool to answer your questions!"

I turned on my heel and strode out of the room. Their sputtering, their squalling—I didn't even listen.

Only then Zero himself was running down the hall after me. He caught my arm. "Alan—"

I jerked away. "Forget it!"

"No!" He spun me around. "For the love of Terra, Alan, listen! This belligerence—it only gets you into more trouble."

"All right! I'm listening!"

"Those accusations, the business about rules—they're nothing. I'll take care of them. The real problem's Aneido."

"Aneido?"

"Yes, Alan," He shook his gray head wearily. "The Burton woman's been checking him with her projectoscope. She gets thought patterns, but they don't make sense. Not in terms of what we know about Aneido."

"Does that matter?" I asked bitterly. "You've put a Mek into his job. That ought to be enough."

Zero's forehead creased. "Gervault told me how you felt about that."

"Did he tell you I said it was the end of all progress and the human race?"

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"Yes. And in the wrong hands it could be. But not in ours." He put his arm around my shoulders. "That's why I always stand with you, Alan—because you see things with a clear eye. We need members like you—men who can temper pure science with humanity and understanding."

"But you'll still go on using Process Q?"

"It's the tool we've been seeking—the weapon that will carve our path to power."

"So you'll use it."

"Can we throw it away, Alan?" His eyes locked with mine. "Could you, yourself, when you think of all the lives that have been spent, all the years we've worked and planned?"

I didn't answer.

ZERO said, "We want you to check the girl's work, Alan. She gave us the specifications for the projectoscope under narconosis, and the technicians who did the work on it say they're sure they're correct. But she's normal now and almost as bitter as you are, and it could be she's trying to work some trick."

"Where is she?"

"Down in Laboratory Ten."

"I'll go check, then, for whatever that's worth."

I started to turn.

Zero gripped my shoulder. "Alan. . . ."

I looked at him.

He said, "They're going to be worth it, Alan—all your sacrifices, all your pain. That woman herself will live to thank you; and so will generations yet unborn."

I stared down at the knuckles of my clenched fist. "I hope you're right."

"I know I am, Alan. Good luck, now."

He dropped his hand. I strode off down the corridor, took the lift to the foot-entrance level, and walked back past the mind-shield control room to Laboratory Ten.

A technician I knew came out. He scowled and said, "I hope you can make more sense of this than I can, Lord. And those plastic strips you brought in are even worse."

I eyed him. "What do you mean? What's wrong with the plastic?"

"Nothing's wrong with it. That's just the trouble," he snapped. "We've tried every test in the books on it, and we still can't find any reason for it being melded into that coat."

"And no break on Aneido, either?"

"No, not a thing. Myself, I think that female's crazy. Or else Aneido is. For that matter, any more jobs like these and we'll all be trying to crash the shield just for the jolt."

Still scowling, he stalked off down the corridor. I went on into Laboratory Ten.

Maurine was there, and Aneido, and a guard. Maurine and Aneido sat at an equipment-littered table. They wore the metal projectoscope helmets. Lines of weariness etched Maurine's face. There were dark circles below her eyes.

She looked up as I entered, saw me. Her hand leaped to her throat.

I said, "It's been a long time, hasn't it, Maurine?"

There was a moment of empty silence. Then, instead of answering, she turned to Aneido. "We'll try it again now, General."

She turned the activator knob . . . to the left.

I said, "Mother."

The image of a smiling, white-haired woman flashed on the screen.

It was the same face that had appeared the other time, back there on Luna, when Aneido threw the word at me.

I said, "You must have misunderstood, Maurine. It's the general we're trying to test, not you. Turn the knob *right*, next time."

Her fingers twitched. The screen went blank. *"You—!"* she whispered. Her eyes were shiny as polished glass.

I nodded. "Yes, I was Fred Caudel, for a little while. There's a thing we

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call a neurotron—a mind control—"

"You'll pardon me," Aneido cut in. "This thing's too hot for comfort, and I see you have personal matters to discuss." He lifted off the projectoscope helmet, set it on the table, and walked over to the nearest slot-window. His heavy face was blank, impassive.

I sat down in his chair. "Maurine. . . ."

IN A low, tense voice she said, "I loathe you, Alan Lord! I loathe you more than I thought it was possible for me to loathe any man. Down through the years, so long, I'd hoped and dreamed—and now, you've done this to me. . . ."

Her fingers twisted at the fabric of her jacket, till the fibers gave and the whole meld ripped.

I caught her hand. "Please, Maurine!"

She just stared at me. It was worse than if she'd jerked away.

I said quickly, "Maurine, it doesn't have to be this way! The Society will control the whole system in another year—every satellite, every planet—even the FedGov. There'll be an end to Security's tyranny. Science will rule. We can be together, happy—"

"Happy? With you?"

I could taste the vinegar and gall.

"'Science will rule.'" Her scorn burned like acid. "What do you Mechanists know of science? Science is only a tool, a means to an end. But you've transformed the means into the end and made a god of it—a paranoid god for frustrated 'superior minds.' You won't accept the human race as it is; you've got to try to force it into your pattern—"

She broke off. Rising, she lifted the metal helmet from her head and set it beside the other on the table; smoothed the dark coil of her hair.

When she spoke again, her voice was dull and flat, "I loved you once, Alan. I even dreamed that perhaps somewhere, somehow, I could love you again. Now I know better. Because you're really a Mechanist now. You measure everything in terms of power for your Society—life, love, your own destiny. You and your kind, you've forced Security's tyranny on us, because it was the only way we could stay free from the worse one you threatened. . . ."

From the slot-window, Aneido said, "There's another thing you should know, Lord. Not all science is in your hands."

I looked up. "What—?"

He strode back to the table. "You Meks aren't the only ones with minds. For example. . . ." He lifted one of the helmets, pointed to the cable socket. "You see?"

I frowned and leaned forward. "Do I see what?"

"This!"

His left arm whipped round my head. I caught a blurred glimpse of the helmet hurtling at the guard.

Then a great club-fist smashed at me. I sprawled on the floor. Before I could move, Aneido had snatched the guard's blaster.

He said, "We're leaving now. Those plastic strips in Raines' coat have a special molecular structure that serves as the focal element for a new-type finder developed by *our* laboratories. We designed it especially to help us locate you Meks' headquarters. If you'll look out your window, you'll see that it's worked."

Maurine beside him, he backed out the door. The lock clicked.

I ran for the window.

The mind-shield's blue-white tracer charges still crawled and sparked about the cave-mouth. But now I saw red light, too. Out of the darkness of space, great scarlet globeships of the FedGov fleet were sweeping down. The first loomed like a monstrous crimson ball.

The guard wiped blood from his forehead. "Don't worry. That pair won't get far." He tugged open a locker and pulled down a bolt-rifle.

The door's lock splintered with the first shot. As coolly as if he were on

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a target range, the guard stepped out into the corridor, sighted, and fired.

A hundred yards away, just short of the outer gate, Aneido jerked round in mid-stride and pitched to the floor.

The guard sighted on Maurine.

I swayed there, while eternity came and went in a single moment. Again, I heard Zero's words, the things Maurine had said. All the years gone by, the other struggles—they faded away to mist and shadow.

My belly knotted. Because this was the decision point I'd always turned from. This was the awful, ultimate, paralyzing instant when I went to make my choice and take my stand.

And it had come too late, too late. The guard's finger already was tightening on the trigger; I could see it now. No matter what I did, there could be no victory. The net had drawn too tight about me. Whether I struck as a man, or stood fast as a Mek, Maurine would die and the human race would fall.

I lunged, and jerked the rifle out of the guard's hands.

He staggered, off balance; then caught himself. His eyes flicked to me—half puzzled, half angry. Then the tension faded. His mouth twisted in a slow, sour grin. "Oh. The woman." And, shrugging, "The shield will get her anyhow."

I smashed his jaw with a butt-stroke and raced for the shield-room.

The duty man came up out of his chair as I burst in. "What the hell!"

I knocked him down, whirled, and fired a bolt straight into the tube-unit.

There was a hissing, a crackling. Circuit breakers clicked.

I fired another bolt—into the master switch, this time. The whole board-bank went dead.

I doubled back into the corridor and ran after Maurine.

At the end of the hall, the lead-sheathed gate stood open, a dead guard beside it. I stumbled through, into the outer cave.

Ahead, blaster in hand, Maurine was clambering over the rocks toward the globeship.

Then, beyond Maurine, a flanking port opened. More guards rushed out. One kicked the blaster out of her hand before she could fire.

The others lunged for me. . . .

XII

THEY took us straight to Zero's office, a bleak, bare cell without even one window slot. Standing there beside Maurine, before the man who'd been my chief, I could feel the tension hum like a fiddle's plucked E-string.

Then, at a word of command, the guards withdrew. The heavy door thudded dully as it closed behind them, and the three of us were alone.

There was an aching moment of silence. Then Zero said, "I'm sorry, Alan. This time you've gone too far."

"Forget it," I answered thickly. "I made my mistake a long time ago. Twelve years back, the day I joined the Society."

His eyes were piercing. "You really mean that, Alan? It's not just this woman?"

I looked at Maurine. She looked at me.

"I mean it," I said.

"But *why*, Alan?" Zero spread his hands in a helpless, uncomprehending gesture. "Why throw it away? You could have had anything. Anything!"

"Anything but the right to make mistakes." I leaned on his desk, palms flat. "That's the trouble, Zero—the thing no real Mechanist can ever understand. The whole human race has got to have the right to make mistakes. Trial and error is still the only way any species can progress."

"And of course, by your logic, that makes me the villain." He smiled a dry, wry smile. "Next time I'll wear a long black mustache."

His face sobered. He said, "I had such hopes for you, Alan. Even that you might succeed me. And that could mean

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something, now that we've got Process Q. Because with it, there's no question but that we'll win."

"Even with those globeships out there?" I couldn't keep the incredulity out of my voice. "Even with our atmosphere being drained away?"

"Of course," Zero shrugged. He flexed a paper-knife against the edge of his desk. "You see, Alan, we still have Aneido. Our own Aneido, the one you helped create. As soon as we get through to him, he'll call the globeships back."

"And till then?"

"We can hold out. The Center was designed for defense, you know. This office itself is an independent unit. It would take at least a cycle for anyone to break it. And even then, I'd still have my escape hatch—" he gestured to a trap-like door behind him—"to the surface."

"Then there isn't anything for me to say." I straightened, taking Maurine's hand in mine. It was cold as ice.

Zero bent the knife between his hands. "There's a bare chance you might still survive this crisis, Alan, if you weren't so stubborn; you know my influence with the Council. As for the woman—" his lips twisted—"Process Q would give you a reasonable facsimile with a conditioned approach acceptable to the Society."

"You're wasting your time, Zero."

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to face the consequences, Alan." There was a note of real sorrow in Zero's voice—but the sorrow couldn't hide the steel. He laid down the paper-knife. "The sentence is death. For both of you."

Maurine's fingers tightened on mine.

MY STOMACH was swirling. The whole scene suddenly seemed somehow strange and unreal. The thought of death—that didn't shake me. I'd faced it too many times before. But to die for nothing . . . to go down knowing that the Society still would triumph because I'd helped to bring life to a Mek Aneido—

Maurine whispered, "It's all right." Maurine, who would die beside me.

Zero's bony forehead furrowed. He pressed a button. The door opened. A guard said, "Yes, sir?"

"Take them away," Zero said. And then, as the guard stepped forward, "Wait. . ." He bent across the desk and snapped on the squawker. "Have we gotten through to Aneido yet?"

The squawker crackled, "No, sir. But there's something else—a call from the globeships."

"Put it on my circuit."

The squawker clicked. A deep voice said, "This is Aneido talking, Zero."

Zero's paper-knife scraped the desk.

The deep voice said, "I'm calling on you to surrender."

Zero thrust aside the knife. He leaned close to the squawker grill. "Aneido! You don't understand! This is *Zero!*"

The deep voice laughed, a short, harsh laugh. "And this is Aneido, Zero—General Karl Aneido, not your cheap Mek imitation!"

Zero's gaunt hand clawed the desk. "You're crazy! Aneido's dead!"

The squawker blared raucous mirth. "Did you take me for an utter fool, Zero?" the deep voice jeered. "Did you think I'd risk my own neck in your trap, back there on Luna?" The harsh laugh rang louder, longer. "No, Zero! I'm not that raw and guileless. I sent a double, a human double! Whatever you did, you did to him. I'm making a present of the creature you left behind in place of him to our psych lab."

For the fraction of a second the silence echoed. Maurine, Zero, the guard—they stood like living statues.

I knew what I had to do, then. Not for me; it was too late for that. But at least, Maurine might live. Heart pounding, belly writhing, I fell back one quick step.

It broke the guard's paralysis. He started to spin.

I kicked for the back of his knees. They hinged. He lurched to one side, flailing wildly, and I chopped a stiff-edged hand down on the back of his neck

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with all my might. His teeth clicked together; his head snapped forward.

I leaped across him as he fell. "Maurine!" I shouted. "The door!"

Zero was already surging up from the desk, face a gaunt, hewn caricature in grey and purple. The paper-knife glinted in his hand. "Damn you, Alan—"

I hit him. He went back down in his seat again. The knife rattled on the floor.

I pivoted. "Maurine. . . ."

She turned from the closed door. "Don't worry. I've thrown the bolt."

"Good," I nodded. I even tried to mean it. "You'll be safe here till Aneido can get to the escape hatch."

It must have been the way I said it. She stared at me, face suddenly shadowed. "And . . . you—?"

I laughed, after a fashion. "Do I have a choice? I'll wait here with you—till the FedGov hangs me."

"Alan!"

"Face facts," I shrugged wearily. "To the FedGov, I'm still Alan Lord, Mek agent. Last-minute reformations not accepted. So—I wait till I hang."

Beside me, the squawker did things to a deep bass chuckle. Aneido's voice rasped, "That may be a while, Lord, if you've really got Zero penned up with you. Under the circumstances, and from what I've just heard over this circuit, I'll trade you for him any day with no questions asked. All I ask is five minutes to get there!"

The squawk-box clicked off, then, but I still stood staring at it, caught fast in the grip of a creeping, sweeping numbness. There were so many things that surged inside me—shock, sheer disbelief, a hundred others. I was hot and cold at once, both stiff and shaking. I wanted to curse, to laugh, to shout.

Only I didn't give way to any of them; because then—suddenly; incredibly—Maurine was close beside me, so very close. Her eyes were shining. . . .

We didn't mind the wait . . . together.

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He wouldn't have her if—and she WAS

The Last Dame

By CURT STORM

TONY HACKETT, fourth officer of the *David Garrick,* had just finished buffing his teeth and was appraising the whiteness of his smile when the first explosion staggered the huge liner. Before he had time to curse, Hackett was hurled at his undeniably handsome image in the chrome mirror. Even as his stunned mind rejected the possibility that the contorted features flying at him were his own, there was time for two thoughts:

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"Mother Cosmos! The repair crews failed— I should have made a pass at that Darli babe sooner."

Then Hackett met Hackett with shattering force, his head exploded and he ceased to think. . . .

The first explosion blasted the starboard field generator through the *Garrick's* hull and tumbled her into a violent end-over-end. As she dropped abruptly through Lume 1, the speed of light, the unbalanced stresses became overwhelming and she began to split like a fat dowager popping her buttons. The catastrophe was too great for the carefully-engineered safety circuits. Within micro-seconds, megavolts of energy flared through the control panels and not a circuit breaker released before it was fused forever. Raw power raged unchecked through the vitals of the liner and she was doomed almost before she snuffed out the first human passenger. By the time she had swapped ends, scarcely a flicker of life was left aboard.

Only one thing happened as planned— and that was a tribute to the men who built the *Garrick*.

The lifeboats, insulated and isolated from the mother ship in their cocoons along her sides, awakened at the first twinge of trouble. Sensory curcuits, operating on the self-contained power units of the lifeboats, explored the escape corridors while analyzers studied the *Garrick's* death throes, feeding data to computers that calculated the last possible instant of escape.

Hatches open, the lifeboats waited for the living to flee to them. Their command circuits forbade release unless they had life aboard.

Number Four boat received the first human, a stumbling, burned and blinded creature that came out of a flaming cabin and collapsed when it set foot in Four.

Seconds later, a whimpering female was recorded aboard Number Two, port-side forward boat. She was given a sedative by an automatic dispenser and the flashing command board printed a message for her to strap into a seat.

'Midship, the sensory corridor probe of Number Seven detected someone crawling from the crew quarters into the escape corridor. The man crawled with his head hanging and his eyes shut. His arms bent, once, and he slumped on his face, but he got up on his elbows and doggedly tried again. Sixty feet from the hatch of Seven he went down and remained motionless. Inside Seven a relay clicked. The escape corridor moved on its rollers and brought the man to the lifeboat, where he was moved to a medical bunk. Treatment would begin later. Right now, all circuits were busy.

Shortly afterward, Seven's computer indicated that time was running out in that part of the *Garrick*. The probe scanned the empty corridor once more, then the hatch slammed shut. Nose and tail clamps released and Seven shot away, instants ahead of a blast that left only smoke and metal debris floating where the lifeboat had been.

Number Four also received the command to release but it hesitated, scanning the bunk where its burned passenger lay. Then the release order was countermanded. Four no longer had life aboard.

Only a few seconds later, Number Two shoved off, located Seven in the distance and swung after it. Together they would try to locate a habitable planet for their precious cargoes.

The tumbling *Garrick* glowed red and white, erupted in a nova-like blast and became, unnoticed, the dust of space. . . .

TONY HACKETT came to life with a groan and a head that was several sizes too large, bursting with pain. As soon as he decided he was alive, a wretched nausea curled his stomach and he fought it down with difficulty.

An insistent thought was pecking at his consciousness, a memory. What the devil was it? And why was he lying here on his back with a fourth-order hangover? He'd been on watch and now he had a date with that Darli doll from the tourist deck, the cutest thing he'd seen

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in six years on the *Garrick*. Tonight, by the time he took her back to her cabin, the build-up would be complete and he would add another to the list of ladies who had discovered a delightful extra service provided aboard the *Garrick*. Unofficially, of course.

Then he remembered the explosion.

Alarm jolted through him and he opened his eyes to scramble up, but stopped in sheer disbelief. Above him was no dull gray ceiling, but a sunny sky. Near the perimeter of his vision a few birds wheeled and he got his elbows under him, despite the hurt in his head, to watch them. They were swooping over the edge of a lake or sea, where low combers broke on a beach. Hackett felt sand between his fingers.

"Mother Cosmos," he said, addressing the deity of spacemen, "I don't know how, but you sure pulled me out of that one!"

Something touched his head and he stiffened, still held in shock. A husky woman's voice exclaimed, "Thank God, you're awake!"

It isn't Darli, he thought, as he slowly turned toward her, but at least I'm not alone.

His brain was functioning almost normally now. By some miracle he had gotten to a lifeboat and been brought here. It must have taken several days and he'd been unconscious all that time. He recalled being flung toward his image in the mirror and diagnosed a concussion. That explained why the devices in the lifeboat hadn't awakened him. Immobility was the best treatment.

He saw a woman's arm, bare to the shoulder, and automatically catalogued it as a trifle plump. She was behind him and he began carefully pushing himself to a sitting position, wincing at the dizziness and pain in his head.

Finally he could see her clearly and a swift, practiced glance showed him what he had drawn in this strange cosmic sweepstakes. She kneeled in the sand, silent, a big woman—no, a girl, really, about 27 or 28. Her clothes were badly torn, as if she'd been flung about on the *Garrick*. Under what was left of the skirt he saw broad hips and plump thighs. She had square, peasant shoulders and heavy breasts and her face was round. All in all, a big-boned creature, probably quite tall, definitely on the beefy side.

His experienced eye caught one more feature: no wedding band.

Dammit, he thought irritably, just my luck to get a cow in a deal like this.

He realized that they were staring at each other wordlessly, alone in a vast expanse of sandy beach.

"Well, hello," he said.

She nodded and tried tentatively to smile. Hackett noticed that there were tear tracks on her face.

"I'm Tony Hackett, the fourth officer, or ex-fourth. I don't remember seeing you aboard."

"I'm Herta Maricksson. I was on B-deck in my cabin when the explosions began. What happened, Mr. Hackett? Everybody said the *Garrick* was so safe and I woke up from my nap with something pressing me down into the couch and the alarm bells clanging. When I went out in the corridor I couldn't stand up and. . . ."

Her words were coming in a rush and her eyes widening as if she were reliving the experience.

"Stop it!" said Hackett. "Your nap and your couch saved your life. You were relaxed and perfectly supported in what amounted to an old-fashioned acceleration couch. Me, I kissed myself in a mirror and damn' near knocked my brains out. Did you pull me into the lifeboat?"

She shook her head.

"You were in another boat."

He turned at her gesture and saw Seven and Two standing side by side between them and the landward edge of the beach, a fringe of semi-tropical foliage a quarter mile away.

"I was so worried when I found you alone and unconscious," said Herta. "There are no cities or towns on this

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planet—I didn't see *any* signs of life when we came down—but the lifeboat landed anyway. Then I thought you might be dying and I'd never get away from here. You can pilot one of the boats, can't you?"

She was leaning forward, unconsciously clasping her hands together, searching his face with anxious eyes and Hackett looked away uncomfortably. He hated to have to tell her, but apparently she thought they could just climb aboard one of the boats and go home. He'd make it as easy as he could, but he had a feeling this Amazon wasn't going to take it that way.

"Look." he said. "this doesn't seem to be a bad place. The air's good and it's warm. . . ."

"But I've got to get back to Procyon! Daddy will be worried sick."

Then she stared at Hackett and her arms rose to a defensive position across her breasts. He noted the gesture and almost snarled at her. What the hell made her think he'd bother to keep her here? After the dames he'd had!

But he supposed it was a natural feminine reaction. Ugly or gorgeous, each one seemed to think she had the most precious equipment in the galaxy.

"There's a complete instruction book on every lifeboat," said Hackett. "It's under a big sign in the main cabin. Didn't you read it?"

"I—no." She colored.

A nice, hysterical trip you must have had. thought Hackett.

"All right, so I'll have to tell you. And don't blow a gasket, or you'll get yourself slapped. These lifeboats are loaded with automatic gear and supplies to keep humans alive and well, but it doesn't leave much room for power. They can travel a good many lightyears in space and they can make one landing. That brings the castaways to a relatively safe place. in theory."

Herta knelt there like a lump and slowly digested that. Hackett saw the look of horror slip into her round face.

"You mean we can't—?"

He nodded with what he hoped was reassurance.

"I mean this is home."

After a few moments she got the idea and she screamed a thin, hopeless wail. Hackett regarded her with loathing, leaned across the space between them and slapped her roundly. He was almost enjoying it until things began to spin in his head and darkness closed down.

He came out of it momentarily to find himself being dragged through the hatch of the lifeboat. Evidently Herta was muscular. He grinned weakly and was unconscious again.

WHEN Hackett opened his eyes, he was once more out on the sand. his head pillowed on a cushion from the lifeboat. The sun was low over the water and he blinked at it dubiously. After cautiously trying out his head and finding that it felt almost normal, he raised up to look around.

"Well, Mother Cosmos, I'm still on my own jets," he said. "Thanks."

Herta came hurrying to him immediately. her big body looking strangely restricted in the torn, abbreviated costume.

"Is this tomorrow?" he greeted her, pointing toward the sun.

"Yes. You've been unconscious twelve hours."

Seeing his frown. she added, "Daylight and darkness last about eight hours each."

"And you lugged me into the boat and out again?"

She looked embarrassed.

"I thought the sun would do you good and—I'm quite strong."

A regular little horse, he agreed silently.

"I want to apologize for yesterday. I —it was quite a shock. Then, you had to—overexert."

He realized her embarrassment was coming dangerously close to tears. Damned if he were going to comfort her. She was about as cuddlesome as a sack of potatoes and if she ever tried to lay

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that thick head on his shoulder, he'd knock it off hers.

"Forget it," he said gruffly. "We've got a lot of things to think about. Soon as I can get around, we'll have to locate a spot where we can settle and raise food. With two lifeboats and just the two of us, we probably have supplies for five or six years, but most of that should be saved for emergencies, like crop failure."

"I read the instruction book on the boat last night," said Herta. "It says our transmitters are sending out signals constantly."

She leaned toward him with the same anxious look she had worn yesterday. "That means someone will find us soon, doesn't it? There'll be rescue ships out?"

Here we go again, thought Hackett. He couldn't meet her eyes and he dropped his gaze to the deep vee between her breasts. What he'd have given for this view of the Darli babe! But if Darli were peaches and cream, Herta was meat and potatoes.

He sighed and looked off, down the lonely beach.

"Look, I'm sorry to be the one who tromps on your ideas, but you might as well have it straight."

And if I have to swat you again, I hope I don't pass out.

"In an ordinary case, those transmitters might bring help. Trouble is, the *Garrick* was about 40 parsecs off course before I discovered there was a shorted feedback loop in the nav computer servos. We corrected course but we didn't notify anybody of our position because we'd have had to slow below Lume 1 to get a message transmitted. The skipper didn't consider it necessary. Then the planoid field began warping the wrong way and we couldn't reduce the drive without shifting the starboard field into the port one and blowing our own tail off. I guess that's what happened, one of the repair crew made a mistake.

"Anyway, you and I are sitting at least 35 parsecs from where the search ships will look when the *Garrick* is listed overdue. We're off the spacelanes, in a backwater where nobody ever comes. Our signals have a range of a quarter-parsec, but even if somebody came that close he wouldn't receive them unless he were traveling slower than light.

"It's remotely possible that during our lifetimes this planetary system might be surveyed, but by that time our power would be gone and we couldn't signal them. No, we'll do better to cut off the transmitters and save the juice."

Herta was silent. Slowly he let his gaze slide back to her.

The big round face was a little lopsided and there was a glistening spot at the inside corner of each eye, but that was all.

HACKETT felt a grudging admiration, which he pushed back firmly. The big gal was taking it this time and the killing of her last, desperate hope must have been pretty rough.

Rougher than it would be for most, he admitted to himself, remembering yesterday's squawk about getting back to Daddy. It was probably the ancient story of the unlovely daughter, beau-less and babied by an indulgent papa until she was hopelessly lost without him.

Great—now I'm saddled with her.

"Sorry," he muttered aloud, "but that's the way it is."

"It's not your fault," said Herta. "I think I realized it, really, but I was trying to make myself believe we'd be saved."

"There isn't the chance of a photon in a dark cloud."

She nodded and swallowed hard.

"I've read about the colonies that have been discovered, thriving worlds of people descended from a handful of survivors like us."

Herta was looking at him diffidently and Hackett recoiled.

Oh, no, fat gal. Tony Hackett isn't founding any dynasty with you.

He'd heard women adapted faster than men, but this plump pigeon was

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way ahead of him, too far ahead. He'd have fought a hundred men for the chance to populate a world with Darli, but Herta! He raged inwardly at the thought.

She could damn well get over that idea! If she couldn't get a man among the trillions in Galactic Central, she needn't think he was hers just by default. Why, if she were the last dame in the universe. . . .

She was, he realized, as far as he was concerned.

No matter, he'd had his fun and big hopeful, here, was as safe as she would have been in one of those archaic nunneries.

"Yeah," he said coldly. "Look, I've got to start getting back on my feet and it might as well be now."

He began gathering his legs under him and Herta moved forward quickly, but he put up a hand.

"No, I can make it okay."

Nevertheless, she hovered close by while he cautiously stood up, not moving too abruptly for fear of the dizziness returning.

Finally he was on his feet and grinning with triumph.

"You see?" he said, turning toward her. But he made the turn too fast and blackness swept down and left him swaying.

When it passed, he found her arm around him, supporting him solidly, and her flesh was warm and firm against his side. He felt a bleak rage swelling inside, against himself and her, but what the hell could he say? They had to get along, in order to survive.

"Thanks," he mumbled thickly, and she began shepherding him gently toward the lifeboat.

AFTER that incident, his strength returned rapidly and he spent longer and longer periods on his feet. He watched himself carefully and at the first sign of tiredness, he rested, determined that she should never have another chance to put her arms about him. And always, he tried to keep a couple of feet of space between them. Sometimes it wasn't possible, in the close quarters of the lifeboat or when she helped him get out their supplies their bodies brushed together often and at these times he rode his temper down with an effort.

"Why stick me with this, Mother Cosmos?" he groaned self-pityingly.

Once it occurred to him that she was deliberately creating many of these instances and he watched her narrowly, but her round face was bland and expressionless. He was forced to admit that she didn't seem to notice their physical contacts and he realized that his touchiness was building an unhealthy tension in him. His training in spaceways self-discipline enabled him finally to forget it.

Hackett turned off the automatic distress transmitters and spent a couple of days checking their stores against the listed supplies of the lifeboats, with Herta's help.

Next, he opened the record cabinets of Number Seven boat and extracted the microfilms for examination. The films showed running shots of the *Garrick's* end, periodic pictures of Seven's navigational instruments, and views of the two solar systems the boat had explored, the second of which contained their planet. Herta became excited over the instrument pictures.

"You could figure out where we are from those, couldn't you?"

"Sure," agreed Hackett coolly. "Some rainy night when I'm bored. But just what good will it do us?"

She didn't mention the matter again.

Hackett was much more interested in the mapping job Seven had done of their planet. An irrational hope had been building in him that there might be a native human population. But as he pored over the hundreds of aerial photos, he found no sign of so much as a thatched hut and he gave up in final disillusionment. He and Herta were truly alone.

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There was much valuable information in the records. Their earth-type planet was the second from a small star and their orbit was estimated at 312 of the 16-hour days. The lifeboat had set them down not far from the equator, so there should be but a slight seasonal variation in temperature (the planetary axis was tilted four degrees from the orbit plane).

Beyond their beach was a row of low hills, just visible from the lifeboats, and back of the hills the photos showed a vast, apparently fertile plain stretching to the base of a distant mountain range.

Hackett pointed that out to Herta as their probable future home.

"We'll be across the hills from the ocean, well protected in case there are tropical storms here. On the lee slope of the hills there must be small streams flowing into this river and one of those will give us water—our hydrators won't last forever. Then I'll build a water wheel to run one of the generators and we'll always have electricity."

"Yes," said Herta, eagerly. "And there's lots of good land along the plain for our chil—"

She goggled at him, hand over her mouth, and Hackett turned off the projector with a loud, angry snap.

THE following afternoon they discussed the new home again, Hackett in an edgy mood. Since he had regained consciousness, Herta had accepted a passive—bovine, he thought—role. She followed his suggestions without question, and today she seemed especially conciliatory, probably to atone for yesterday's slip.

She thought that moving across the hills meant leaving their lifeboats and Hackett pointed out the sledlike construction and explained that they could drive to the new location without using up too much of their power reserve.

"I'll walk across first and scout out the exact place. On the way back I'll mark out a route for the boats. That way we'll know precisely where we're going and won't waste a watt of power."

"But it's so far and you've been ill!" she protested.

"Nonsense. I'm just about back to normal and it's only ten miles, straight-line. I'll only be gone two or three days, depending on how long it takes to find a good spot."

"Then I'm going too."

He scowled. "No."

"But I'd be terrified to stay alone here!"

"For the luvva Sol, why?"

"B-because we don't know what *things* there may be here," she stammered.

"We haven't seen a thing here on the beach," he pointed out. "If there is anything dangerous, it's over where I'm going. No, you can lock yourself in the boat if you like and stand off an army. I'll travel faster and farther alone and that's how I'm going."

He lighted one of the cigarettes he'd been hoarding and prepared to continue the argument. But when he looked up, she was gazing at him with such naked submission in her eyes that he quickly turned away.

Like the peasant women on the colonial worlds, he thought, and then he realized he was whistling a jaunty spacemen's tune.

THAT evening just before retiring, they had a brief hassle which couldn't be called an argument. Hackett rebelled against sealing themselves in Number Seven, where they had taken up residence.

"No sense in stifling, when we can leave the port open and have fresh air," he announced.

Herta had closed up every night while he was ill and continued the custom since.

"But suppose something came in!" she cried.

"Don't be silly," he admonished cheerfully. "I'll put on the detectors, if it makes you feel better."

In his bunk he dropped into sleep almost immediately. He slept very deeply

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and when he came awake with the conviction that something was not normal, he had no idea what time it was.

He opened his eyes, prepared instantly for any trouble, and saw in the dim amber glow of the nightlamps that Herta was standing before him. She was naked and her sleek flank gleamed like old ivory under candlelight.

Hackett was still for an instant, looking at her. He hadn't realized that she had a passable figure. Big, but definitely shapely.

Their eyes met in the semi-darkness and held. He had only to make a gesture, he knew, or say her name.

"What is it?" he asked quietly.

She started.

"I—I thought I heard something moving around, outside."

He rolled his head from side to side. "Out detectors are up. If anything bigger than a microbe comes within a hundred yards, the alarms will sound and if it gets within fifty, the force field goes on."

She nodded dumbly but still she hesitated and he watched the proud hemispheres above him move with her breathing.

"Get a good night's sleep," he told her gently. "I'll know if anything comes and I'll take care of it."

She left without another word, the muscles playing smoothly in the strong columns of her thighs as she strode out of his cabin.

He lay, trying to make his mind blank enough to sleep again. After a time he heard the muffled sounds that came from across the corridor. He did not sleep for a long time.

The following day Hackett began making up a pack for his exploratory trip. He wasn't in any hurry and he carefully selected enough concentrates for a week, several useful survey instruments, and two weapons, one a nerve gun, the other a long-range projectile type.

Herta was very quiet today and she merely nodded when he told her he'd leave at dawn the next morning.

He found himself watching her covertly, noticing things about her that he had not seen before. Her size and strength had blinded him to the grace with which she moved. Her stride was lithe, the joyous movement of a vibrant, healthy animal. He noted other details, too. The gentle, melting curve of breast into shoulder. The way her reddish hair lay softly against the pillar of her neck. The moist, expectant swell of her lips.

Then he realized what he was doing and recalled the size of her.

"Percheron!" he snorted, and fell to rearranging his pack.

That afternoon he stretched out on the sand for a nap, knowing that he'd probably need all the strength he could marshal for tomorrow's trek. But he slept fitfully at first and then he dreamed.

For a time he was back on the *Garrick* with a Darli who insisted on wearing transparent dresses; then he was in the Cluster Cafe, near the spaceport on Omnidom II, and a dozen Darlis danced suggestively until he reeled drunkenly, shouting, "Stop!" His dream's eye panned in like a video camera and he was in the very midst of them, intoxicated by the nearness of their flesh. But they drew away suddenly, unfolding rank after rank like flower petals to reveal—

Herta, standing very still in the spotlight, her sleek flanks gleaming like old ivory under candlelight. . . .

After what seemed like hours, during which he stared at her, Hackett wrenched himself out of the dream. He rolled over and slammed a fist into the loose sand.

"Cut it out, Mother Cosmos," he growled reproachfully.

HACKETT turned in soon after their evening meal, with the excuse that he wanted a good night's rest. But he was still awake long after he heard Herta turn on the detectors—she didn't close the port—and go to her own cabin.

More hours had gone by on his wrist

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chrono and he had cursed himself to exhaustion before he fell into a light, intermittent doze. A dozen times he roused and lay back, to sleep and rouse again.

He had fragments of dreams. A glimpse of Herta bent over the galley. Herta sitting in the sand, one long, contoured leg straight out before her. Herta leaning toward him in her torn blouse, stretching in the early morning sun, standing over him in his cabin. After that they got worse.

Because he was Hackett he came raging out of his bunk and chain-smoked the last of his precious cigarettes, sitting on the edge of a chair and scowling at the night lamps along the baseboard.

He jammed the last butt into shreds and glared at his chrono. Half an hour until dawn. He could shove off now. By the time he plowed over the long expanse of sand to reach the woods it would be light.

With the decision made, he felt a little better. Strapping on his holster and pack he wondered with a touch of excitement what he'd find out there. Would there be deer, rabbits, varshi, the normal game of other worlds?

In the main cabin he picked up his rifle and prepared to step out. The detectors would note his going but no alarm would ring for him, so he could leave them on for Herta's protection.

He stopped in the port. If she awakened to find him gone there was no telling what she'd think, nervy as she was. He turned back, seized a scrap of paper and wrote:

"Leaving early to make better time. See you soon."

He propped it against a record case on the table, then stood irresolute a moment.

Hell, better put it in her cabin. Then she'd find it first thing.

Hackett grabbed up the paper and walked quietly back down the corridor. Her cabin door was open and he eased in, pausing to accustom his eyes to the amber nightglow. He wondered where to leave the note, thought: on her clothes. They were on a chair near the bunk.

After placing the paper, he straightened and stood briefly, watching her. She lay on her back, a light cover outlining her body, and her breathing was deep and easy.

He was about to turn away when her eyes opened and it was too late. She lay still, without saying anything and he saw her gaze shift to his pack.

He made an uncomfortable gesture.

"I came in to leave you a note. I'm starting a little early."

She remained silent. Her eyes seemed unnaturally bright in the dimness. He leaned closer and saw tears.

"Look," he said gruffly. "There's nothing to burn a jet about. Just keep the detectors on and you'll be safe as a credit in stasis."

She shook her head emphatically.

"I don't *care* about that," she cried. "I—if anything should happen to you. . . ."

(Advt.)

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Hackett stood flatfooted on that, wondering how to answer. He didn't know what lay in the hills out there. And what words could he find that would reassure this strong girl who seemed so dependent upon him?

"I've got to go," he told her. "We can't survive forever on this beach. Now, you be a good girl and stop worrying. I'll be damn careful and I'll be back as quick as I can."

He bent over to give her a brusque peck on the cheek and make a fast exit. At least that way he wouldn't have to cope with hysterics and, besides, he had an uneasy memory of last night.

But at the last moment she turned eagerly to meet him and her lips were softer than starglow. Shock held him first and then he lingered to taste a rarer drink than any he had known. She stirred and her arm came from under the blanket to slide across his shoulder.

At last he straightened and her eyes followed his in the dimly-lighted cabin.

"Tony, Tony, don't be angry!" she cried. "I know you're terribly upset because there's no way we can be married, but don't you see, darling, there's nothing we can do about it? If we *feel* right about each other, then we're truly married."

"Mother Cosmos!" he breathed and sat down weakly on the edge of her bunk. She thought. . . .

His initial impulse was to roar with gargantuan laughter, but only for an instant and then he thought maybe he should get down on his knees beside her. Instead, being Hackett, he reached for the straps of his pack. . . .

The sun was nearing the zenith and Hackett got his stride adjusted to the swing of his pack and the softness of the sandy beach. He took great, chest-swelling lungfuls of the tangy air and glanced keenly ahead to the forest's edge. Then he lifted his head and grinned sheepishly into the sky.

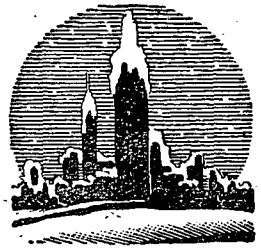
"Well, Mother Cosmos," he said, "you made us men out of monkeys and sometimes, I see, you work it the other way. But this time, old girl, thanks!"

And he turned to wave to the distant figure standing gloriously beside the lifeboats.

He *would* return.

Science

Once it was like a candle's glow
Brought to a darkened room
Where many thought that it would show
The Weaver and the Loom.



The room grew bigger every year,
The shadowed walls receded,
And all which they had thought so clear
Was nevermore conceded.

But still the candle flickers there—
A small, determined spark
Whose tiny light keeps glowing where
The shadows were so dark.

by A. Kulik

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Time, somehow, made a painless jump . . .

TRANSFER

By

CHARLES F. KSANDA

SHE was in the kitchen, setting the oven thermostat, when the door chime tinkled.

"Oh, damn," she said aloud, and she lifted the lid of the casserole. She put it down and looked hard at the jar of seasoning, as though expecting an answer. This thing had to be right; when Ben called at noon he had promised an extra-special guest for dinner.

That was all he had said. Mysterious—Ben liked to be mysterious.

It was the captain's first leave in twelve years, but he left them something to remember him by!

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"Oh, damn," she repeated and added the seasoning.

The door chime tinkled again.

A salesman, doubtless—and probably a robot one at that. Robot salesmen were impossible. You couldn't argue with a robot; they didn't listen. You couldn't reason with them; they had no minds. Nothing but a can full of tubes and wires and a voice box loaded with two thousand years of selling experience.

The man at the door was not a salesman. He was not a robot. He was not altogether a familiar sight, but she recognized him from the pictures in Ben's album.

"Oh, Lord," she said, but not aloud. For an instant she stared wildly behind her. The hands of the living room clock stood squarely on five. "It can't be," she said, knowing it was. An hour early: but it most certainly was their guest.

"Captain!" she said, "Captain Conrad!" And she tried hard to make a brilliant smile. "Ben's talked of you so often!"

Looking at the powder blue uniform, so strange in a world where men wore business suits of banker's gray or oxford gray or dark blue, she thought of Ben's class picture. Midshipman Conrad had stood front and center, looking erect and young and very serious. Ben was in the back row, slightly out of focus; but then he shouldn't have been in the picture at all. The following week Ben flunked out—but that wasn't the expression. Civilians flunked—you *bilged* out of the Academy of the Space Navy.

"You're Marjorie," the captain was saying. "You're Ben's wife."

He seemed to be examining her as he might a rocket engine to detect some slight blemish. He was still erect and serious, but he was older. His face was older by twelve years—by twelve years and by something else. She hung his tunic, and when she turned he was looking at her hair, at her housedress (it was old, but spotless and freshly ironed), at her legs, and she suddenly remembered the run in her stocking.

If he had come when he was supposed to, it would have been different. It would have been all right.

"I called Ben right after we berthed this morning," the captain said. "He said to come at six. And yet—"

"Of course," she said, "he should be home soon. Please sit down."

"In my business, you know, you learn to be punctual. A minute, out there, can be a thousand miles."

It's bound to be difficult at first, she told herself; he's been away twelve years. Twelve years out in the black cold winds among the stars: she wondered what he must be feeling now, coming home, how she herself would feel, what one would expect of people.

THE captain prowled about the room, occasionally examining his watch in a puzzled way. He caught her looking at him and said, "It could be wrong. In twelve years a watch could go wrong. Out there, we tell a different time, by the stars. But my watch—I haven't changed it since I left, always thinking I might like to know the time at home."

"You must have missed home," she said.

"At first. Not any longer." He had located the clock, and was looking from it to the watch, gleaming chromium on his bronzed wrist. "An hour's difference. Somehow in twelve years I have gained exactly one hour."

He looked as though he were trying hard to remember something.

"Please," Marjorie said, "it's my fault if you seem to be early, but we don't have guests often, and I'm not a very good housekeeper. Cooking dinner is a major operation and—please sit down." Her words sounded jumbled; something about the captain seemed to mix her up. "If you'll excuse me for just a few minutes so that I can get into a new dress and a face; I'm sure we'll both be happier."

She pointed out the colorvision set, gave him the afternoon paper, and left him still looking at the clock. Upstairs,

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she dressed quickly. Where, she wondered—combing her hair, pushing it deftly into place with her fingertips—was Ben? The captain's being early was probably Ben's fault, some misunderstanding.

She had planned to wear a black dress, but at the last minute decided it was too sombre and wore her red faille instead. When she returned to the living room, Captain Conrad was seated. The color-vision screen beside him was blank, the paper was in his lap but had not been unfolded. There was a look on his face that had nothing to do with her.

"It was summer when I left," he said. "I remember it was a very warm evening. The ship was unbearable; it smelled of metal and ozone, and the bulkheads would burn your fingers. For twelve years you can forget everything and then remember perfectly. My watch is still on daylight saving time," he said. "How stupid!"

She felt more at ease now, secure in her home and her dress, in the reassurance of having seen her own face in the familiar mirror-pretty, if not beautiful, with just the proper cosmetics properly applied—and she felt he was making an unnecessary fuss over the time. Probably he felt so too and was searching for the significance of it; for the captain seemed not altogether present. It must seem to him as though he had returned to a half world. Perhaps it was only a half captain who had returned, a man who in twelve years' living in black emptiness had already shaken a good deal of the clay from his feet and was changing into something ethereal.

She was asking some inane question about life in the Space Navy, and he was trying to give an equally inane reply, when Ben came home. Ben pumped the captain's hand and hailed him as though he were a block away, but the captain remained quiet; and when Ben seized his shoulder Marjorie felt for an awful moment that the captain might be crushed.

Ben made cocktails and they drank—the captain under protest.

"My first in twelve years," he said. "It burns on my tongue, and in my throat and stomach, and soon it will start in my head."

But Ben only laughed and said something about making up for lost time. Marjorie excused herself and went into the kitchen. The electric clock had stopped; so had the oven. Her casserole was cold, congealed, and only half cooked.

Ben! She was coldly furious. Eight fuses in one week, and each time Ben had said, "I'll take a look tomorrow." She went downstairs—the house was old and so had a downstairs—and replaced the fuse.

DINNER, of course, was much later than she had expected. Meanwhile, Ben kept mixing drinks and Captain Conrad kept protesting. From the kitchen, she could hear their talk without hearing all the words. They were discussing old times, with Ben doing most of the talking; and occasionally there was a loud laugh—mostly Ben's.

When the captain entered the dining room, Marjorie felt that he looked more like a man who had been at sea for twelve years than in the tranquility of space. His walk rolled to an unseen tide; yet his eyes were steady, if far away—the eyes of a man who has looked at the edges of the universe waiting for the rise of a mote of land for the knowledge that he has not lost himself forever beyond all ports of call.

At first, she thought that the dinner was going to be a success. The captain began with fine gusto, but after a few bites his enthusiasm waned; he began to pick at his food, and finally he gave up altogether.

"It's very good," he said with an apologetic smile, "delicious. Aboard ship we eat concentrates. The stomach shrinks after a time; it adapts itself. The human body, you know, it's very adaptable, and if you don't need much stomach, then before long you don't have one."

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Ben had brought home a bottle of red wine, and the captain sipped at it, staring after each drink into the surface of the liquid. Perhaps, Marjorie thought, he sees the reflection of his life in there, or perhaps only the red of sunset: the kind he had not seen for twelve years. It must be a terrible thing after all that time to come home and find it not quite home any longer, and to know that in a day or two you will be gone again without having time to find it.

"Back out there?" Ben was saying to the captain, his finger pointing vaguely toward the ceiling. "*Why?* I could get you a job with the Company. Power Unlimited: all kinds of atomics; you'd fit right in as an executive. You'd double, triple your salary right off, and you'd never have to leave your nice plastic desk. Hasn't twelve years been enough?"

WHEN the captain didn't answer, Marjorie said, "Why are you going back?"

"That should be easy to answer, but it isn't," he captain said. "Because the answer is nothing that you would think of—nothing you *could* think of, and it can't be said in words."

"Come, come now," Ben said; "the Space Navy's a joke, always has been. Nobody needs a Navy when there's nothing to fight."

"We have other jobs," Conrad said, "routine jobs. It's a long time from Mars to the Jovian moons, Ben, a long time in the darkness. It's a big lonely place for men out there. Sometimes when you're a few years out of the Academy, you think you want to go home, and then you remember the other men: a handful of them on Ganymede . . . Callisto . . . the other places. They're a kind of funny crew; they have to be to stay there. There's one group that's been staring at Jupiter for twenty-eight years, staring with telescopes and bolometers and spectrographs, God knows what. You've never looked at Jupiter and seen him look back with that colossal red eye they call The Spot.

"When you want to go home, you remember the queer ducks, the spore trappers and the air analyzers and the soil investigators— the men who hunt for bugs and old bones, picking away at the face of a world like scavengers in a dump heap. So you make the long run to Ganymede and back, because you have to, you're the life line."

"Hogwash!" Ben emptied his glass and pointed it at the captain. "Let somebody else be the life line."

Conrad smiled faintly.

"You're right. That's not really it at all. Maybe, at first; afterward, it's something entirely different. You first begin to feel at home when you hear the sounds that are out there in space."

"Sounds? There's no air. There's nothing to carry a sound if a sound had been made. What could you *hear?*"

"At the start, it's just a whisper, when the engines are off and you're floating free in an ellipse that'll take you halfway round the sun. Some men never hear it, and it takes a long time for anyone to make it out at all."

"What kind of whisper?" Marjorie said.

"Did you ever hear snow fall?"

Ben shrugged his shoulders, while the captain seemed to wait for a more favorable reply.

"I have," Marjorie said. "When I was little, I'd sit at the window and watch the snow fall, and in the middle of the afternoon when I was alone in the house I would hear it."

"Then you may have just the faintest idea what I mean. They say it's dust, particles that swarm around the ship because of its gravity and its magnetic field and the electric charge it picks up traveling through an atmosphere. But there's more to it than that. It's a feeling at first, then an awareness, and finally a knowing—a knowledge that can't be put in words."

"That's all?"

"No, that's scarcely anything."

"Then what is it?" Ben's voice was too loud even for Ben. "What are these

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sounds, these whispers—what do you really hear?"

The captain shook his head. "I have never seen a rainbow; tell me about the colors in it."

"Why, there's red, and orange, and green, and—"

"But I've never seen colors. What is red?"

"Red? Red? Why—red is like Marjorie's dress."

"But I have never seen a rainbow, I have never seen red, and I can never see Marjorie's dress because I am blind. Now tell me about a rainbow, then I'll tell you why I am going back out tomorrow."

There was a silence in the room. Ben seemed not so much puzzled as dissatisfied. Marjorie moved in her chair and smoothed her dress carefully over her legs.

"Space is supposed to be cold and dead. But think what that nothingness is filled with: with light from the stars and a billion intersecting gravity fields, with cosmic rays, with dust too: the dust of neutrons and electrons and protons—all the stuff the worlds are made of." Conrad struck the table and a drop of wine spilled from his glass and stained the cloth, like blood. "This solidity we're accustomed to is mostly emptiness, the physicists tell us; what is the earth—what are we all—but space with a little greater concentration of dust? Everything we're made of came out of that darkness. Is it so strange that it should have a life of its own?"

"You mean *things?*"

"Probably not things at all," the captain said quietly. "Light isn't a thing, or a gravitational field. I don't know." He shook his head as though to clear it either of the past or the present. "Men become strange out there sometimes. It's not any melodramatic space madness. It's not even anything you can put your finger on."

"Awareness?" Marjorie said.

The captain looked at her gratefully.

"By heaven, worms!" Ben laughed. "Cosmological worms!" He laughed again, more heartily, and clapped the captain on the shoulder.

Then the lights went out.

THERE was a moment of silence, and then Marjorie said in a restrained voice, "It's the fuse again." And again there was silence, and the darkness seemed to be growing.

"I'll get it," Ben said easily, his chair scraping the floor. "It's only the fuse; I'll have it fixed in a minute."

Marjorie could hear him blunder into the furniture; her eyes tried to follow him, but the darkness had covered her.

"Let me give you a hand," Conrad was saying. "I've grown eyes like a cat."

There were bumping sounds. She could hear very plainly, but she could not see. The room was sinking beneath her, into an ocean, and she was trying desperately to swim back to the surface. The trouble was that her eyes were wide open and could not see.

She groped forward to find the comforting solidity of the table.

"Don't bother, Ben will fix it; don't bother, really." Her voice, she thought, still sounded like the gracious hostess, and her eyes moved reassuringly to the place where the captain sat, and on her mouth she could feel the grotesque caricature of a smile.

"Ben puts things off so," she said. "He's known for weeks that something was wrong . . . wrong. . . ."

Her voice drowned first, and then her lungs. The room was in utter darkness, but where the captain sat was a greater darkness—as much greater as midnight is darker than noon. She could feel the cold of it, and where the captain's eyes should have been were two pools filled with light.

They were stars, a million of them in each eye, glittering bright and swimming, moving toward her and growing until she was looking down into two universes and falling. . . .

Before she could push her fingers into her mouth, she screamed.

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Time, somehow, made a painless jump. The lights were on again, and she found herself on the living room couch, a pillow propped awkwardly beneath her head. She was taking a glass from Ben's hand and drinking and seeing above its rim the captain looking bewildered and somewhat concerned and also a little stern.

He looks like a boy playing a man's game, she thought, standing there in his powder blue uniform and shiny black boots; looking stern. Men always took their professional lives so seriously. She wanted to laugh; surely there was nothing about the captain to cause a woman to scream.

"Feeling better now?" Ben patted her shoulder and she nodded.

To Conrad she said, "I'm terribly sorry; I can't imagine what happened. Whenever I try to be a specially good hostess, everything goes wrong."

"Nerves," Ben said. "It's my fault; I'm going to have the wiring looked into the first thing in the morning."

"Yes," she said, "that was it, nerves."

"Sit down," Ben said to the captain, "and have a drink. We can use one."

"I should be going. If the Port Engineer's inspection is favorable, we'll be leaving early tomorrow."

"One for the road," Ben insisted.

"Please stay," Marjorie said, rising. "You two can talk while I clean up."

In the dining room, she fumbled ineptly with the dishes. And each time that she returned to the dining room from the kitchen she had to be very careful to have some thought firmly in her mind to keep it from returning to the terrible, the unfamiliar, flaming dark. In this way, at last, the table was cleared and the dishes went through the washing and the rinsing and the drying cycle. She was replacing the last of them on its shelf when she heard the sound of the door, and in a moment Ben came into the room.

"He's gone. Said to tell you good-by and to thank you."

"I'm sorry," Marjorie said. "I'm afraid I spoiled his evening."

"No, I did—too much to drink. Poor Conrad."

"Ben, did you see him? Did you see him in the dark?"

"Sure, he didn't glow or anything. It's nothing like that."

"He was sitting there, across from me, when the lights went out . . ."

"Say, funny thing about that—wasn't a damn thing wrong with the fuses. The lights went back on by themselves, but while they were off the meter was clicking like crazy. Some kind of sudden power drain, but that should have burned out a fuse, and it didn't. Conrad and I both checked them."

"He was with you—downstairs?"

"Why? What's the matter?"

"The whole time?"

"Sure, he led the way. You know I can't see a thing in the dark." Ben patted her shoulder again. "Now, you'd better get to bed. I think Captain Conrad has got us both a little mixed up."

"I think I will. I think I am mixed up."

"Say," Ben called after her, "he left me his watch—a good one. He said he wouldn't need it again. What do you make of that?"

SHE knew what to make of it, but she did not tell Ben. For twelve years the Captain had kept his watch, thinking he might like to know the time at home. Now, the captain had found a new home where he would be telling a different time by the stars.

She walked deliberately up the stairs, knowing that Captain Conrad was gone from Earth for good, and feeling that there was something more she should know. She stopped inside the bedroom doorway, her fingers reaching for the light switch but not quite touching it. They remained that way as she looked into the room.

She might have stood there for only a moment, but it was also an eternity. For there is an outer time measured by clocks and stars and the spinning of the world, and an inner time which can

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hang forever on a second.

Finally, there came the sound of Ben's familiar heavy step on the lower stairs, and somehow her fingers reached the light switch. The room turned rosy and warm, and instantly she thought it might have been imagination—just nerves. Mightn't it? She was mixed up.

Her eyes drank of the familiar things, the flame-proof, stainproof curtains of plastic that looked like chintz, the matching material of the counterpane, the dresser with its bottles of perfume neatly arranged, and above it the round mirror in which she saw her face every morning and night, the chair on which was draped Ben's blue chalk stripe suit (she had meant to send it to the cleaner) and at last her eyes moved to the foot of the bed.

On the rug, the familiar gray rug of duralon that had a nap stronger and softer than wool, were two spots of purest white. She stooped and touched them. They were colder than ice. Footprints, they might have been, of glistening frost crystals, already nearly vanished into the warm yellow air.

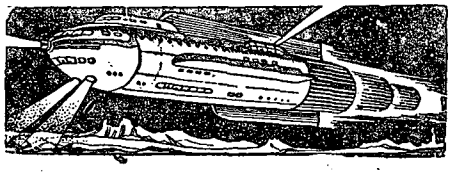
Rising, she turned toward the door. She heard Ben's footsteps coming nearer and heard beyond them a more urgent sound—the vast and silent whisper of the night. Desperately she tried to think of some way to tell him that he must not turn out the light, that she could not be in a room that was dark, not ever again.

For she knew now that there had been not one guest in her home this evening, but two. And there had been a trade; as irrevocably as one had gone, the other had come to stay. She knew this as she heard Ben turn out the lights in the hall, as she watched him carelessly throw wide the door, and a whimper came from her lips.

Ben was blind to it. He walked *through* it, and was unaware. Yet there in the hall behind him, where it was dark, was that which had stood beside her bed: the form of greater darkness with bright feverish stars burning where the eyes should have been.

It had come to live with her. Yet, when they were in bed, she couldn't tell Ben. What could she say? She remembered Captain Conrad's words: "Tell me about a rainbow, and I will tell you why I'm going back out tomorrow."

Then she watched Ben's hand as it reached out easily—and firmly snapped off the light.



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They were interrupted by an unexpected visitor

MISSION

A Manning Draco Novelet

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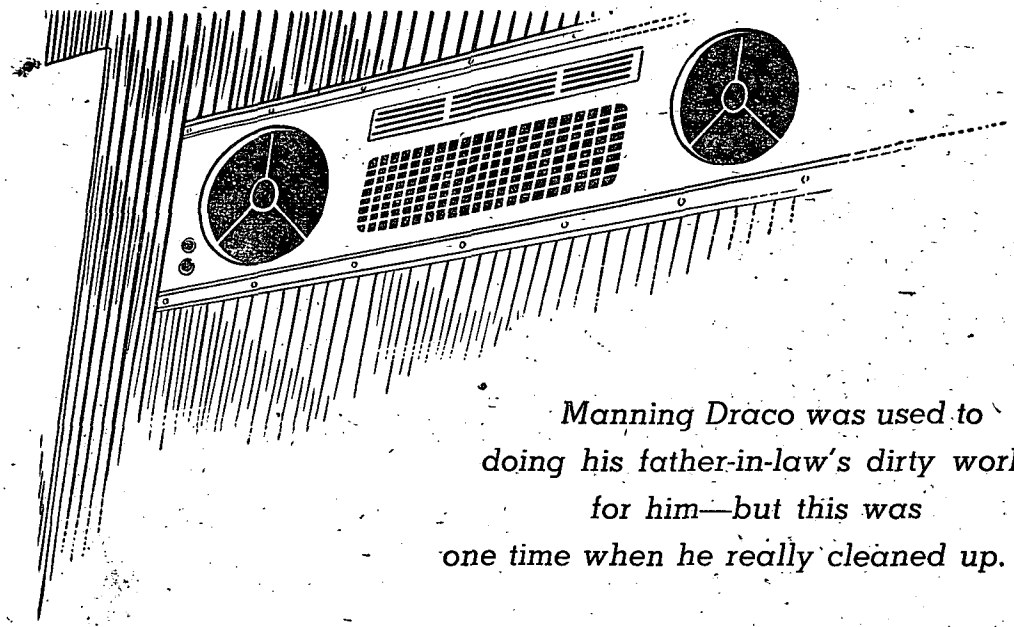

Manning Draco was used to doing his father-in-law's dirty work for him—but this was one time when he really cleaned up. . . .

II

IN A busy universe, Rigil Kentaurus was undoubedly the busiest system of all. The two planets had been taken over by the government in the very beginning of the Federation, partly because of the nearness to Terra ("Only 4.3 lightyears on your spaceometer") and partly because both planets were pleasantly habitable for Terrans and the native Kentaurusian population was small enough to make it an easy task to move them away. The Founding Fathers of the Federation had planned well, making Rigil Kentaurus the only completely self sufficient system in the galaxy. The second planet was given over to supplying the needs of both planets. It was a masterpiece of industrial ingenuity. Through the control of environment, they were able to raise the foods of every world, so that the government workers of the first planet might have their home products. In addition it was the source of the necessities and luxuries of every planet in the Federation.

to MIZAR

By Kendell Foster Crossen

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Due to the second planet, it could be truly said that the galactic representatives on the first planet enjoyed a home away from home.

The elaborate defense installations of Rigil Kentaurus were also on the second planet. It was said that not even a pebble could float within two hundred miles of the two planets without being spotted, tracked down, and destroyed within a matter of seconds. Incoming ships had to identify themselves to the outer patrol ring, five hundred miles from the planets. Many had tried but none had succeeded in passing the outer patrol ring unless they were on legitimate errands and were expected.

The first planet in Rigil Kentaurus was the seat of the Federation government. There were gathered the best brains* of 107 planets (or so it was claimed), busily engaged in the affairs of government. The entire planet was covered with buildings—government office buildings, private homes and apartment houses, and a shopping center with several hotels for the benefit of those who had to visit Rigil Kentaurus. The only open spaces were the beautifully landscaped parks.

Manning Draco had landed his ship, the *Alpha Actuary*, on the government-port early in the afternoon. Since he had been expected there had been no trouble coming through the patrols and when he landed there was an official aircar at the port waiting to whisk him across the planet to the offices of the Secretary of Expanding Frontiers. It was a command appearance before the Cabinet member.

After waiting an hour in the anteroom, Manning was finally shown into the presence of the Honorable Patrick Masuko. The Secretary was a middle-aged Terran, obviously aware of the honor bestowed on anyone who was summoned to meet him.

"I'm a very busy man," he said, "but my distinguished colleague, the Secretary of Planets who I understand is your father-in-law has suggested that I take the time to learn about your vacation service."

"Fine," Manning said. He launched into a sales talk on the advantages of vacationing on sunny Caph-II where, thanks to a Time Fracture, one could spend ten months, yet be gone only two weeks. As he talked, he set up a portable projector and flashed pictures of Caph on the wall. The full color shots of the blue sand and the towering purple trees were impressive. There were several shots of the massive Draco Hotel where, as Manning pointed out, every luxury and entertainment was provided for guests. "It is especially ideal," he concluded, "for such a busy man as yourself. May I inquire if you were thinking of Caph for your annual vacation?"

"No," said the Secretary. "As a matter of fact, I'm about to marry again—Miss Mathilda Yat-Sen, of the Pan-Galactic Yat-Sens, you know—and I was thinking of my honeymoon."

"Spendid," Manning said. "We consider Caph particularly fine for honeymooners. We have a number of excellent honeymoon cottages, some of them in isolated spots, others near to the games and sense-resorts. I might point out, Mr. Secretary, that a honeymoon on Caph has many advantages. Not only does it prolong the many delights of this special occasion, but if it is so desired—since a two week honeymoon will mean ten months on Caph—the bride may have her first child before returning. In the case of lower income families, where the bride works, this enables her to have a child at once without losing more than two weeks from her work. In your own case it would mean that your wife can immediately resume her social obligations without the troublesome problem of trying to conceal a delicate condition."

"Er—yes," mumbled the Secretary. "I will get in touch with you, Mr. Draco."

MANNING took the hint and began to fold up his equipment. "And don't

*Saramandi Smith, a political philosopher of the 33rd Century, claimed that the political failures of mankind are due to the fact that the best brains are always located in the seat of the government. "Swivel-Chair Thinking," he called it.

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forget, sir that we provide transportation in the most luxurious space liners. We'll be glad to serve you, Mr. Secretary."

"Naturally," the Secretary said in a matter-of-fact voice. "I was glad to see you, young man. We think very highly of Secretary Cruikshank. He is the highest type of public-spirited citizen."

"I'm sure he is " Manning said and his tongue was only partly in his cheek. At the moment his own opinion of J. Barnaby Cruikshank, the owner of the Greatest Solarian Insurance Company wasn't certain of this. "The clearance of your ship has been temporarily cancelled. The Analyzers have returned an unsatisfactory report and I'm afraid we'll have to hold the ship until we have checked further."

"But that's silly," Manning protested. "I came here at the request of Secretary Masuko and the Analyzers cleared me on the way in. Nothing can have changed about the ship while I was here, unless you changed it yourself."

"That may well be," the officer said smoothly, "but the ship cannot be cleared

Ball and Chain

MANNING DRACO enthusiasts, of whom there are a legion, displayed small signs of unease at his marriage a couple of stories back. They were apprehensive that the bonds of matrimony might be something of a ball and chain around the ankle of the agile sleuth. However, it is now safe to report that Draco's ability to leap from the frying pan into the fire has been unimpaired.

It is a fiction hero's solemn duty to get himself into as much trouble as possible and then to bumble his way out. In this activity, Manning Draco is unsurpassed. Nor has it ever been proved that acquisition of a wife reduced the amount of trouble in man's lot—which is the kind of remark Manning Draco might make.

—*The Editor*

and Manning's former boss, was at its highest. The patronage of high government officials would mean a lot to the Draco Vacation Service and for once it looked as if J. Barnaby were trying to do him a favor.

He left the Expanding Frontiers building and went straight back to the governmentport. He was filled with kindly thoughts of his father-in-law and had decided he'd have Vega invite him down to Terra for dinner soon.

Manning's ship was surrounded by men in the familiar yellow uniforms of the Federation Patrol. An officer stepped forward to meet him as he hurried toward it.

"Terran Manning Draco?" he inquired crisply.

"Yes." Manning said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing serious," the officer said, although his manner indicated that he to leave Rigil Kentaurus."

Bureaucratic red-tape is annoying under the best of circumstances; it is doubly so when a man is anxious to get home to his wife and child. "How long will it take?" Manning asked curtly.

"It is difficult to say, sir. Not before some time tomorrow morning."

Manning cursed under his breath. "Where can I rent a ship to take me to Terra?"

The officer shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir, but until your ship is cleared it will be impossible for you to leave. I believe you will find the Terra Hotel very comfortable, sir."

Manning turned and stalked into the terminal. He went into a visibooth and put in a call to his father-in-law. After patiently identifying himself to at least a dozen under-secretaries, he finally found himself facing J. Barnaby Cruikshank. As usual, J. Barnaby looked as

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if he were personally saving the universe from disaster, but he recovered enough to express pleasant surprise at hearing from his son-in-law.

Manning thanked J. Barnaby for the interview with the Secretary of Expanding Frontiers, answered questions about Vega and little Barnaby, and finally got around to the matter that was most pressing. He explained the situation which faced him at the governmentport.

"That's too bad," J. Barnaby clucked sympathetically, "but I'm afraid I can't help you, Manning, my boy. Security is the one branch of government which is barred to the rest of us."

"But it's so damned silly," Manning said. "I was cleared on the way in only three hours ago. It's impossible that there could be some element in my ship that wasn't in it then. The Analyzer must have flipped its lid."

"Very possibly, my boy," J. Barnaby said, "but I'm afraid there's nothing we can do about it. Even the President has to accept the orders of Security. I'll tell you what; you run along and call Vega—she'll understand—and get checked in at the hotel. I'll pick you up later and we'll have dinner together."

"All right," Manning said reluctantly. He broke the connection and went out on the landing patio of the terminal. An aircab took him to the Terra Hotel.

BY THE time he had talked to Vega, made gurgling sounds at his son when she held him up in front of the visiphone, and had a shower, he was in much better humor. When J. Barnaby Cruikshank arrived to take him to dinner, he was almost glad to see his father-in-law.

Still in his early forties, J. Barnaby was one of the most successful men in the Federation. He had inherited the insurance company, but it was J. Barnaby himself who had built it into one of the largest and richest monopolies in the galaxy. For several years, Manning Draco had been chief investigator for the Greater Solarian Insurance Company, Monopolated, during which time he and J. Barnaby fought almost continually. Then, at about the same time that Manning married Vega Cruikshank and left to start his own business, J. Barnaby had been invited to become Secretary of Planets in the Federation Cabinet, thus fulfilling a lifelong ambition. For a while after that, amicable relations had existed between the two men. This new friendliness had received a sharp setback when J. Barnaby had forced Manning to do an investigation job for the government, but now that he was apparently trying to help Manning all was once more sweetness and light.

They had dinner in the Senate Restaurant, one of the finest dining spots in the universe. It was a good dinner. For the first time, J. Barnaby seemed to show a genuine interest in Manning's business and as the dinner progressed Manning relaxed. He almost liked his father-in-law.

As they were being served coffee and brandy, the conversation finally swung around to J. Barnaby and his new career.

"Not too good," J. Barnaby said in response to a question as to how it was going. "You know, my boy, there are problems in this job that make running an insurance company seem like a snap. But then you don't want to be bored with my problems. . . ."

"Let's hear them," Manning said. He was in a kindly mood and knew that J. Barnaby wanted to talk.

"As a matter of fact, I have a rather delicate problem on my hands right now. Do you know the system of Mizar?"

Manning shook his head. "I seem to remember that it's a double sun, but that's about all."

"Mizar," said J. Barnaby, "is about to be admitted to the Federation. Officially, the act is to take place in about a month. The only inhabited planet is the first one in the system. There will be some fairly valuable mineral rights on the other planets, although it is not believed there will be any profitable trade with the first planet. The Mizarians are an

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intelligent people, but industrially they lag behind the rest of us. One factor, however, makes them extremely valuable to us. I might say they are potentially one of the most valuable planets of the Federation."

"Why?"

"The Mizarians," J. Barnaby said, lowering his voice to a confidential tone, "are cryptesthesists."

"Come again," Manning said.

"Cryptesthesists. They are not telepaths in any sense of the word, but they have the ability to know what an opponent's next step will be. In other words, if you were to give them a standard telepathic test with the official Rhine Cards, the Mizarians would be one step ahead of you—they'd know how the cards would fall on the next round."

"And they're not telepaths?"

"No. They can't read minds at all."

"I never heard of such a thing," Manning said.

"This is the first race discovered with this ability." J. Barnaby admitted. "The ancients on Terra believed that certain men had this ability, but they were never able to prove it. We've run every possible test on the Mizarians and there's no doubt they have this ability. Think what an advantage it will be to have our space fleet piloted by Mizarians. Why, they would be unbeatable in battle—if we are ever involved in a war."

"Even against a telepathic race?" Manning asked. He knew that the only strong anti-Federation movement was headed by the Acruxians, who were telepathic.

J. Barnaby nodded. "The Mizarian mind cannot be telepathed and so fighting against a telepathic race wouldn't alter our advantage."

"So what's this about troubles?" Manning asked with a grin. "It sounds to me like good news."

"Except for one thing," J. Barnaby said gloomily. "You know of the situation between the Federation and the Acruxian Axis. So far it has been only a battle of wits, but should the Acruxians get even the slightest advantage we are convinced that they'd invade the Federation. Right now, the balance of power between us in so delicate that both sides are equally careful. You will recall when you helped us out that it was necessary to permit the Acruxian agent to escape. We didn't dare arrest him. In the same manner, last week they permitted a Federation agent to escape rather than risk an open break with us by arresting him."

"But what does this have to do with Mizar?"

"Recently," J. Barnaby said, "there has been evidence of a growing anti-Federation feeling on Mizar. We have just learned that there are Acruxian agents at work on that planet. Do you remember Dtilla Raishelle?"

Manning nodded. Dtilla Raishelle was the Acruxian agent with whom he had tangled the time J. Barnaby had forced him to go on a government mission.

"Well, we think that Raishelle and possibly two other agents are on Mizar. If this anti-Federation sentiment continues, it's possible that Mizar may yet decide not to join the Federation. In that case, they might then decide to join the Axis of Acrux. If that happens we are certain that we will soon be involved in war."

FOR the first time, Manning's old suspicions of J. Barnaby returned in full force. His father-in-law was telling this story in too complete a manner and his face was wearing a bland expression which Manning knew too well.

"No," he said.

J. Barnaby sighed. "It's true," he admitted, "that I hoped that you might be prevailed upon to go to Mizar and straighten this out. After all, we have very few agents who are capable of standing up against an Acruxian. You are, you must remember, the only Terran who has ever developed a secondary mind shield. There should be certain responsibilities in connection with that."

"No," Manning said again. "It's not

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as if you didn't have plenty of other agents, even if they're not Terrans, who are capable of doing this job. I will not be browbeaten into pulling more of your chestnuts out of the fire. I'm warning you, J. Barnaby—"

"My boy, you wrong me," J. Barnaby said heartily. "I wouldn't think of tricking you. I'll admit that I was hoping you might volunteer to do this for us, but if you don't care to then that's all there is to it. But I wouldn't think of forcing you into something you don't want to do."

Draco looked at J. Barnaby with mounting suspicion. This was a new Cruikshank, the authenticity of which he seriously doubted. "What are you up to?" he demanded.

"Nothing," J. Barnaby said blandly. "You misunderstand me, my dear boy. If you don't want to go, then we won't talk about it. Let's talk about other things."

To Manning's amazement, they did just that. At first, he was still looking for a trap of some sort—he had never know J. Barnaby to give up on something he wanted—but when the subject still didn't come up, he relaxed. Maybe J. Barnaby really was changing.

Nor did Mizar come up during the rest of the evening. By the time J. Barnaby dropped Manning off at his hotel, the latter was convinced that he'd been undully suspicious of his father-in-law. He spoke once more with Vega on the visiphone and then went to bed.

He had no idea what time it was when he awoke. For a minute he had no idea what it was that had awakened him. Then, suddenly, he realized that every light in his room was on. He swung his feet to the floor and sat up on the edge of the bed. He looked around the room. Everything seemed to be just as it was when he'd gone to bed except for the lights. He knew he had turned them off.

On each side of his room there was a door connecting with the adjoining room, so that two or more rooms could be rented as a suite. Suddenly the door on the left opened and a girl ran into the room. Long blonde hair streamed back from her head and there was an expression of fright on her face. Even in that momentary glimpse, Manning saw that she was beautiful. She was also quite nude.

Without even seeming to see him, she dashed by, passing so near to the bed he could have reached out and touched her, and vanished through the door on the other side of the room.

Judging by the expression on her face, Manning expected somebody, or something, to be following her. But no one else came through the door nor was there any further sound. When it was obvious that nothing else was happening, Manning reached over and flipped on the room phone. The screen glowed into life and the face of the night clerk looked out at him.

"Yes, sir?" the clerk asked.

"What the hell's going on in this hotel?" Manning demanded. "I was just awakened by someone's turning on all my lights. Then a beautiful and naked girl ran through my room."

"Yes, sir," said the clerk as though this were a common event. He stared at Manning and the light of intelligence came into his face. "You wanted her to stop, sir?"

"No," Manning cried. "That is, I would have liked her to stop before she ever got to my room. See that it doesn't happen again."

"Yes, sir," the clerk said again. His face stared out of the screen with interest. "But I must say, sir, that we get very few *complaints* about beautiful nude women being in guests' rooms."

Manning broke the connection angrily. He thought about it a minute and then decided that the girl and the clerk both must have been drunk. He turned the lights off again and went back to sleep.

II

MANNING was up early the next morning. The first thing he did was call the governmentport. He was told polite-

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ly that his ship still had not been cleared and that he might try them again later. In a vitrolic mood, he ordered his breakfast sent up. He was having his coffee when there was a call for him. It was J. Barnaby.

"How are you this morning, my boy?" he asked. He seemed to be in an unusually good mood.

"Terrible," Manning said sourly.

"Why not drop over to the office after you've finished your breakfast?"

"No," Manning said. "My ship still isn't cleared and I thought I'd go down and try to put a rocket on their tails."

"You come on over here." J. Barnaby said, "and maybe we can do something about it. I just had an idea. . . ."

Manning agreed and the connection was broken. He hurried through his coffee and went downstairs, intending to get an aircab. To his surprise, there was an aircar from the Planet Department waiting for him.

A few minutes later he was being shown into the ornate offices of the Secretary of Planets.

J. Barnaby Cruikshank bounced up cheerfully from behind his desk and shook hands with Manning as if he hadn't seen him in months. There was something else strange about him, but it took Manning several minutes to figure it out. When he did, he didn't understand it. J. Barnaby, who usually looked as if he were sitting in the midst of a ruined world, today gave the appearance of having stopped disaster in its tracks.

"What are you looking so smug about?" Manning asked sourly.

"Smug?" said J. Barnaby. "My dear boy, you misjudge me. I am merely filled with well-being, overwhelmed with a sense of brotherhood, aware of the goodness of life."

"Uh-huh," Manning said drily. "Well, how about spilling a little of that over in my direction and arranging to have my ship cleared?"

"Just what I was thinking about," J. Barnaby said airily. "I gave the matter much thought last night and this morning and I think I've hit on it. You remember my remarks last night about Mizar?"

"What does that have to do with it?" Manning asked, suspicions returning in full force.

"Well, if you'd care to take on that little mission for us, I'm sure there would be no problem of getting your ship cleared. After all, it is in the interest of Security to have the Mizarian situation straightened out. It shouldn't take you more than a few days and then you'd be back home."

"So that's the way the jets burn," Manning muttered. "I should have guessed right away that you were back of that in some way. You got me up here by having your friend, the Secretary of Expanding Frontiers, pretend to be interested in Caph, then you had my ship held so I couldn't get away. Well, it won't work. I won't do it."

"You wound me deeply," J. Barnaby said, doing his best to look wounded. "It's just that it occurred to me this would be one way out of your difficulty. As a matter of fact, I'm prepared to go farther. As you know, once Mizar enters the Federation, certain concessions will be open to Federation monopolies. While I can't give you any of the manufacturing concessions, you can have first choice of any of the service concessions."

"You know what you can do with your concessions," Manning said. "The answer is still no. I will not go to Mizar."

J. Barnaby Cruikshank sighed heavily. "I'm sorry you're making it necessary for me to take other steps," he said. He opened a drawer and took out a large photograph, holding it so Manning couldn't see it. "I dislike being put in such a peculiar position by my son-in-law. As much as I sympathize with your —ah—youthful spirits, Vega is my only daughter and I fear that my course is painfully clear."

"What are you talking about?" Manning demanded.

"This," said J. Barnaby, turning the photograph over.

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IT WAS a very clear picture of a beautiful nude girl running through a hotel room. It had been taken just at the moment she had been passing the bed, on the edge of which Manning Draco was crouched. The angle made it look as if he were on the verge of launching a flying tackle after the girl. The fear on the girl's face was quite plain and the expression of open-mouthed surprise on Manning's face might have been taken for one of extreme passion. The implications were hardly subtle.

"I too have had my weak moments," J. Barnaby said, "so I can well understand your—ah—feelings of the moment. But I very much fear that Vega will fail to understand. Like her mother, she is inclined to have a narrow view of such matters."

Manning gave expression to certain opinions he had long held about J. Barnaby Cruikshank.

"Unfortunately—for you—" the latter continued blandly, "the next room was occupied by a gentleman who possesses a boundless curiosity coupled with a mania for photography."

"Who just happened to be there," Manning said bitterly.

"Precisely," J. Barnaby said. He gazed at the picture with interest. "Quite an attractive lady. As I said, I can hardly blame you—but I fear that my duty to my only child is all too clear. . . ."

"And I suppose," Manning said, "that you might forsake that sacred duty if I agreed to go to Mizar for you?"

J. Barnaby sighed again. "Unfortunately, my duty to my government is an even greater one. As much as my heart bleeds for my little girl, if you were to go to Mizar and be successful, I would have no choice but to destroy this evidence. It wouldn't do to have a hero of the Federation seen in such a light."

"Very pretty," said Manning. "But I still won't do it. Vega will believe me—I can prove that it was not my fault that I had to stay overnight here. I can also prove that I complained to the clerk last night about that woman in my room."

"The clerk," J. Barnaby said mildly, "is under the impression that you were complaining because she didn't stay in your room. As for the rest, there is no record that clearance was refused your ship. Were Vega to decide to check your story—and as her father I would have to advise her to do so—an investigator would learn that there was no reason why you couldn't leave last night. As for the girl, she would have an interesting story to tell if she were forced to testify in court. I fear it would make me look rather badly, even though it is perfectly normal to protect one's son-in-law."

Manning waited, knowing the rest of it would come out.

"Until this morning," J. Barnaby said, "she was one of my file clerks here. As soon as I heard her story, however, I retired her with full pay. With the understanding, of course, that she not spread this unsavory tale."

"Of course," Manning said. For the next several minutes he gave voice to the more salient aspects of J. Barnaby's character. When he finally stopped it was only because he ran out of breath.

"Purely one man's opinion," J. Barnaby said loftily. He gazed lovingly at the photograph in his hand. "When will you be ready to leave for Mizar, my dear boy?"

"Oh, I'll go," Manning said sourly. "You haven't left me any choice. I'll go at once—the quicker I can get away from the same planet you're on, the better I'll like it. But I'll find some way to make you pay for this, if it's the last thing I do."

"I've already ordered an encyclotape on Mizar to be put on your ship," J. Barnaby said. He put the photograph away in his desk with an air of regret. "You will go to Mizar as Cultural Attaché of the Planet Department. Your job is to stop the Acruxian in whatever he's doing, but to do it in such a way there will be no interplanetary incidents. By the way, what I said about giving you a concession still goes. If there's one you want, clear it with me.

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So long as it isn't something that some cabinet member wants, you can have it."

"That means if it's worthless," Manning grunted. "I can't see them passing up anything that's any good."

"The minute you can assure me the job's done," J. Barnaby continued, "call me here and you can watch me destroy this evidence. Have a good trip, son."

Manning glared at his father-in-law and left.

WHEN he arrived at the government-port, he found the ship free of guards. He climbed in and blasted off, sending the ship hurtling away from Rigil Kentaurus with all the speed he could give her.

When he was finally well beyond the last patrol ring, he fed the co-ordinates of Mizar I into the ship and threw her into magnidrive. Then he put in a call to Vega and explained that J. Barnaby had tricked him into another government mission, without bothering to go into details as to how this had been done. By the time he'd finished talking to her, and listened to the babbling of his small son, he was more resigned to the job ahead. He found the encyclotape on Mizar and slipped it into the audio-reader. Then he leaned back to listen.

"Mizar I," said a pleasant voice from the concealed speaker, "is a Class B planet in the double-star system of Mizar. It is expected to be admitted to the Federation early in 3474. The planet is a mean distance from its sun of ninety-four million miles. Its mass is 0.8 in relation to that of Terra; its volume, 0.8992; its density is 5.12 times that of water; its diameter, six-thousand-three-hundred miles; orbital velocity, 17.2 miles per second; escape velocity, 6.2 miles per second; period of rotation, twenty-four hours, fifty-eight minutes; eccentricity, 0.0123—"

Manning Draco reached over and punched a button. The tape skipped a few inches and the voice took up its story again.

"—gravity at surface, 0.92. More than ninety per cent of the surface of Mizar I is under water and consequently the civilization is an underwater one. The dominant race on Mizar is evolved from an oviparous form of life similar to the *Ornithorynchus anatinus*, once found on Terra, which was at home both in and out of water. They have constructed great underwater cities, protected from water by synthetic bubbles and supplied with fresh air which is extracted from the surrounding water. In general form, the Mizarians are humanoid, although their facial features are quite different from that of Terrans. While they have not advanced industrially to a point where they are on a par with the more advanced races of the galaxy, they have surpassed most races in underwater agriculture and in the extraction of food and minerals from water. Politically, Mizar is an empire and the present ruler is Emperor Alis Volat. There is also a parliament which is elected every two years. The most striking thing about the Mizarians is that as a race they are cryptesthesists. It is believed that this has been their chief natural defense and explains why they have never been successfully invaded.

"The male Mizarians still retain a horny organ on the heel of each foot, in appearance somewhat like a natural spur, which was a characteristic of their primitive ancestors and was not lost in the evolutionary process. This organ is connected with poison glands and is still capable of functioning in the modern Mizarian. In recent times, however, the Mizarians have taken to wearing shoes, mostly as a sign of friendly intentions, much as the Achernarians will often wear fashionable rear-aprons to indicate that they don't intend to use their rudimentary stingers. Certain sociologists have also related this to the Terran custom of—"

Manning reached over and snapped the machine off.

"—shaking hands with their right hands to show that no weapon is being

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held in it," continued a pleasantly-soft voice.

Manning started to turn off the machine again, then realized the switch was already at the off position. When that fact had penetrated, he whirled to look behind him.

SHE stood in the doorway to the galley in the rear of the ship. She was a tiny thing, no more than four feet tall, but quite obviously a perfectly formed humanoid female. Her light blue hair swirled down around her shoulders, making a perfect frame for the tiny, golden-tanned face. Even at that distance, he could see that her eyes were a bright orange. A soft white scarf was wound fully around her neck, then fell down between her bare breasts to her waist. A thin, jeweled thong circled her waist and from it another white scarf hung to the floor. Her neck was fully covered as were approximately three inches in the middle of her body, but for the rest she was bare. It was a figure that any Terran woman might have been proud to possess.

"Who the hell are you?" Manning demanded when he had recovered enough to talk.

"Nisa Brioshe," she answered. She smiled, inclining her head, and he saw that there was another narrow thong running over the top of her hair and down to the very tip of her nose. It was covered with tiny flashing jewels. "At your service."

Dressed as she was, he wasn't sure what the "service" meant and decided it was better not to ask. "What are you doing on my ship?" he asked.

"You are a Terran, aren't you?" she asked.

Manning nodded.

"Returning to Terra?" she continued.

"Not now," he said. "I'm heading for Mizar. We'll be there, in fact, in another hour."

For a moment, she looked disappointed. Then her face brightened. "But you will return to Terra after you have completed your visit to Mizar?"

"Yes," Manning said, "but what does that have to do with your being here on my ship?"

"Everything," she said simply. "It is necessary that I go to Terra for a short time. I had managed to get as far as Rigil Kentaurus and yours seemed to be the first ship going from there to Terra. So I came aboard the first time the guards were not looking."

Manning cursed under his breath. It was bad enough that he had to make this trip to Mizar without his life being complicated by the presence of a stowaway—especially one who was so good looking and so obviously female. Yet it was his own fault. He should have discovered her presence before he even left Rigil Kentaurus* and he would have if he hadn't been too angry to check his ship properly.

"Can't you cover yourself up more?" he asked.

"Why?" she responded, looking down at herself. "It displeases you?"

"N-no," Manning said truthfully, "but it is disconcerting."

She laughed. "You are the first Terran with whom I have talked. I like you. How are you called on Terra?"

"Manning Draco."

"Manning Draco?" she repeated. She spoke the language well, yet there was an exotic way to her pronounciation of his name. "It is a pleasing sound. Did I tell you that I am called Nisa Brioshe?"

"You did," Manning said drily. "Where are you from? I don't recall any blue-haired, orange-eyed humanoids in the Federation."

"We are not a part of the Federation, Manning Draco. I am from Rasalague."

"Acruxian Axis?"

She shook her head until the blue hair danced on her shoulders. "We are an independent system. We carry on a certain amount of trade with both the Acruxians and your Federation. The

*The *Alpha Actuary* had a spy ray which would analyze and identify almost anything, animate or inanimate, which might be on the ship, but Manning had neglected to check it.

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amount depends entirely upon who comes to trade with us, since we have no spaceships of our own."

"Why do you have to go to Terra?" Manning asked.

"It is my time," she said. She smiled at his bewilderment. "We have migratory mating habits. Once this was confined to our own planet, but now when it is time for a Rasalaguan to mate she is assigned to another world. I have been ordered to Terra. Now that I've met you, I'm glad."

"Look," Manning said hastily, "maybe there are a few things you should know about Terra. We are a monogamous society—or at least that's the general idea even though most Terrans ignore it—and I am happily married. That means that I have a mate already, and I don't think she'd like it if I took part in any migratory mating games."

She laughed again. "I like you," she announced.

TO MANNING, her laughter had a faintly ominous ring. He decided to shift the conversation to safer ground. At the same time, he tried to ignore the way she was dressed, or rather the way she wasn't dressed. "How do you manage these migrations since you have no space ships?" he asked.

"Like this," she said. "We avail ourselves of other ships."

"A whole planet full of stowaways!" exclaimed Manning. "If the Department of Transportation ever finds out about this they'll be hysterical. Nisa, my sweet, you represent a problem. . . ."

She arched her eyebrows. "A problem? I was assured that my appearance would be pleasing to most Terrans and that the only problem might be one of controlling interested Terran males."

"I was thinking of a different problem," Manning said quickly. "I meant I can hardly take you back to Rigil Kentaurus now. Even if I could, it might mean trouble for both of us. As a matter of fact, I can't imagine how you got there without being discovered. They're pretty touchy about strangers landing there."

She giggled. "I arrived on the private ship of a—I believe he said he was a senator. He is expecting me to visit him tonight."

"I'm beginning to understand," Manning said drily, with another look at her figure. "Well, you're still a problem. I don't mind your riding to Terra with me, but I have certain work to do on Mizar before then."

"That is no problem, Manning. I will not interfere with your work. I will merely stay with you and keep out of the way when you are working."

There didn't seem to be much choice for Manning. He couldn't take her back and he couldn't just abandon her out in space. He tried to make the best of an awkward situation. "We'll be friends," he said. "You understand? *Friends.* Then when we do get to Terra, perhaps I can introduce you to some nice, unattached young men."

She gave him a long look from beneath lowered lashes. "I think we will be very good friends," she said. It was impossible to tell whether she was putting special emphasis on any of the words.

Manning shuddered and pretended to find it necessary to give attention to the ship. If there were a slight crackling sound in his ears, it undoubtedly came from the thin ice on which he felt he was treading. On top of the phony blackmail material his father-in-law already had, this was all he needed.

The ship shortly came out of magnidrive and hovered over the planet of Mizar I. Gazing into the landing screen, Manning could see almost nothing but oceans. He switched on his communicator and soon contacted someone on Mizar. He identified himself and was given instructions for bringing the ship down on a small island which had been converted into a spaceport. He was told that a subtaxi would come there to pick him up.

He followed a landing beam down to the spaceport and then guided the ship

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into a parking cradle and shut off the power.

"Let's go," he said, sounding more cheerful than he felt.

He and the girl went through the air-lock and stepped out on the spaceport. They were already near what was obviously a small dock and there was a sign in Terran and several other languages, announcing that this was a taxi station.

"I forgot something," Manning said suddenly. "You stay here and I'll be right back. There should be someone along any minute to pick us up."

He turned and hurried back into the ship. There, he looked quickly through the encyclotape index and found one on Rasalague. He put it in the audio-reader and snapped it on. He sent the reader skipping along the tape until he found a reference to Rasalague mating habits. Then he listened.

". . . Almost nothing is known about the sex and mating habits of the Rasalaguans," the voice said. "Any number of surveys have been made, but the Rasalaguans refuse to answer any direct questions. A number of facts, however, have been observed which have in turn led to several theories. For one thing, there are no males on the planet. On at least twenty occasions, Terran observers have been present at the birth of Rasalaguan young and they were also all female. It is known that when a Rasalaguan is considered ready for mating, she is sent away. She invariably returns within a few months and shortly after her return her children are born. Nothing is known about the method of conception or who the father is. This has impelled one authority, Dr. Hans Boichik, to advance the theory that Rasalaguans always mate with a male of another species, while Dr. Anna Maidele—"

Manning had heard enough and none of it was reassuring. He turned the machine off and went outside again. The subtaxi was just arriving as he rejoined Nisa Brioshe.

III

THE subtaxi looked somewhat like an old-fashioned Terran submarine. A door in the top swung open and Manning and Nisa stepped inside. There, they found themselves facing the first Mizarian Manning had ever seen. It was a rather startling sight.

The Mizarian, although he was sitting down, looked to be almost six feet tall. The lower part of his body was encased in clothing similar to Terran trousers and he wore shoes which seemed to be made of light suede. The upper part of his body was bare, but was covered with dark, feather-like hair—or hair-like feathers, it was difficult to tell which. Two powerful arms terminated in four-fingered hands that looked as if they had evolved from front feet. The general outlines of his body and head were certainly humanoid, but his face still resembled that of his primitive ancestor. The top and sides of his head were covered with the same hair-feathers that was on his body and he was apparently equipped only with internal ears. He had two small eyes and then the rest of his face protruded in a large duckbill, with nostril holes in the top of the bill. When he smiled, Manning saw that the inside of his bill was filled with horny plates rather than teeth.*

The door of the subtaxi closed as soon as they were inside. It submerged immediately and started down through the ocean. When it was under way, Manning discovered that there were windows in the sides of the taxi so they could look out.

At first there was nothing to see but water and a few fish which were fairly similar to those found on Terra. But as

*As the encyclotape had informed Manning, Mizarians were descended from the *Ornithorynchus anatinus*, better known on Terra as the Duckbill Platypus. (On Terra, they dated from the mesozoic era, and in an evolutionary sense never progressed beyond that era.) In their primitive stage on Mizar, they had been similar to the Terran form. They had lived mostly in the water, with their nests in tunnels up out of the water. This ability to live both in and out of water may account for their having become the dominant race on ocean-covered Mizar. The evolved race was still nocturnal, as had been their ancestors, and they still hatched their young from eggs, the mothers nursing the young once they were out of the shells.

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they went lower, he began to notice patches of algae of various colors. These patches seemed unusually uniform and finally as they passed one especially large patch, he commented upon it.

"Yes, sir," their driver said. "As a matter of fact, that was one of the finest bacillariophyceae farms on Mizar. Belongs to the Emperor—although, of course, he doesn't farm it himself."

Manning's surprise vanished as he realized it was probably logical for an underwater civilization to farm algae. "Is that your chief crop?" he asked.

"One of the chief crops," the driver said. "Of course, there are several types. Some people prefer cyanophyceae, some chlorophyceae, some phaeophyceae, and so on."

"Any other sort of farms?" Manning asked.

The driver gestured through the window where they could see some small craft rounding up a school of whales. "We're just passing one of the largest dairy farms," he said.

As they went deeper, Manning noticed the various levels of coral. It seemed almost too beautiful to have grown in that fashion. He asked the driver about it.

"Yes, sir, this approach to the city is all coralscaped. We've been controlling the growth and life cycle of coral for many generations. I understand that you Terrans also control the natural growth of your planet to make it more beautiful."

"Not only that," Manning said. "We have also learned how to conceal it behind various kinds of advertising. That's another step of culture which you will undoubtedly learn in time."

Within a few more minutes, the subtaxi neared the city. Manning could see it ahead of them as they dived. There was something weirdly beautiful about coming upon a sprawling city beneath a transparent bubble far below the surface of the ocean.

The taxi entered a waterlock and they waited until the water had drained out. Then, moving on wheels, the taxi entered the main bubble. There it stopped and the driver indicated that this was as far as he went.

AS THEY stepped from the taxi, there was another Mizarian waiting for them. He also wore a single garment, but there was a bright red sash angling across his chest. It seemed to be more a badge of caste than a garment and Manning later learned that this was correct.

"Mr. Draco?" the Mizarian asked. His manner was tinged with the faint hostility which Manning was to find among most of the Mizarians.

"Yes," Manning said.

"I am Depro Fundis, equerry to his Royal Mostness, Emperor Alis Volat. It is my duty to meet such individuals as your Planet Department wishes to send to us. I understood, however, that you would be alone. Is this, perhaps, your consort?"

"No," Manning said. "This is Miss Nisa Brioshe, a friend of mine."

"Friend?" the Mizarian asked. His face was expressionless, but his tone made up for it.

"Friend," Manning said firmly. "She will stay wherever I do, but in a separate room. Is that clear?"

"As clear as most of the things you Terrans do," the equerry said coldly. "It will be as you wish. We try to be tolerant of the fetishes of other races. Come. I have a vehicle waiting."

He led the way to an egg-shaped ground vehicle. He held the door open for them, then followed them inside. He gave the driver an order in his own language, then settled back, making a point of not sitting any closer to them than possible.

"You are fortunate," he said, "in that you arrive on Mizar in the middle of our most important Egg Festival. It is a holiday which I imagine to be unsurpassed in your own world, so it should give you pleasure, in addition to serving your official purpose. You are here as a

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cultural observer, are you not?"

Manning nodded.

"I can understand your desire to observe our culture, but I really don't understand what good it will do you. Since you aren't even oviparous, it is doubtful if you can even understand it."

Manning was beginning to be annoyed by the attitude. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "We may not be oviparous, but you can't say we don't know anything about eggs. Why, we Terrans make the best omelets in the universe."

The flesh around the Mizarian's bill paled visibly. "That was a rather crude remark," he said frigidly. "It might be interpreted as proving the ideas of some of our people."*

"Maybe," Manning grunted. "Where are we going now?"

"I shall take you to your hotel. We have reserved quarters there for you and I presume you can manage to get additional quarters for your—friend. I'm afraid that I must then return to the palace, but we have arranged for someone to escort you to the Festival. He should arrive shortly after we do."

"I hope he will be in better humor than you are," Manning said.

For some reason this seemed to amuse the Mizarian. He gave a short laugh, which bore a slight resemblance to quacking.

"What's the joke?" Manning asked. "Or maybe, here, I should say what's the yolk?"

The offended equerry refused to speak for the rest of the journey.

SHORTLY after delivering them at the hotel, the equerry left. Manning arranged with the clerk for Nisa Brioshe to have a room on a different floor, but on her insistence it was changed to the room right next to his.

Manning's sense of security was further shattered by Nisa insisting that the connecting door be left open. His experience with his father-in-law had left him in such a nervous state that he kept expecting to have photographers leap out from behind every potted seaweed. Every time Nisa drew near, he was careful to move farther away, so that at times their conversations bore a striking resemblance to a chase scene off the visiscreen.

Actually Nisa Brioshe was exhibiting no more than the friendliness she had professed, but her costume was so filled (as it were) with lustier promises it was difficult not to leap to plenty of other conclusions.

They had been in the hotel room—singular because Nisa had spent all of the intervening time in his room—for less than an hour when there was a knock on the door. Manning, still thinking of photographers, tried to get Nisa to retreat to her own room, but was unsuccessful. As the rappings of the visitor began to sound impatient, he finally gave up.

"Come in," he called.

The door swung slowly open and the visitor stepped inside.

Manning Draco stared in complete astonishment.

The newcomer was not a Mizarian. He was at least seven feet tall, his huge cylindrical body was supported by three thick legs. His body was dark gray and bare except for a green, fringed skirt. A holster carried a three-barreled weapon. His head was a pale red knob, perfectly smooth except for a mouth opening and the two inverted ears, covered with a fine network of hairs. Two eyestalks reared up from the top of his head. He had four tentacles, now weaving with pleasure, two at waist level and two at shoulder level.

It was now about five months, at least,

*There was a small political group on Mizar which contended that Terrans—and all other races that were egg-eating—were cannibals and therefore to be regarded only with suspicion and horror. A popular Mizarian psychologist had even managed to get possession of a museum copy of Jonathan Swift and had used it to prove that Terran literature was filled with a sadistic attitude toward eggs. He was particularly concerned over a dish he interpreted as Freud Eggs. He had quite an elaborate theory about the oviphobia of Terrans being derived from a profound sense of loss in discovering that they were not hatched out of eggs. It is too large a subject to cover here, but those who are interested might look up his two books—THE EGG AND YOU and OVUM DENTATA by Dr. Par Egzanpl.

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since Manning had last seen him.*

"You!" Manning said. "What are you doing here?"

"Is that the way to greet an old friend?" the Acruxian asked with mock sadness. "Here I've been rehearsing pretty speeches to make to you and you insist on starting off on such an unfriendly basis. Who's your pretty friend? I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

"No, you didn't interrupt anything," Manning said savagely. Why, he wondered to himself, couldn't anyone accept the fact that he was happily married and through with prowling. "Nisa, this unsavory-looking visitor is Dtilla Raishelle, an Acruxian spy. Miss Brioshe is from Rasalague."

If Manning had been watching closely, he might have noticed that Dtilla Raishelle seemed momentarily disturbed by this.

"What is she doing here?" he asked.

"She's on her way to Terra," Manning said shortly. "She's merely going there with me when I leave. And that's all."

"Then it is a pleasure to meet her," Dtilla said with a courtly bow. "May I inquire if you are ready?"

"Ready for what?" Manning wanted to know.

"You haven't been informed?" Dtilla asked. His tentacles were once more waving with pleasure. "During the important Egg Festival on Mizar, it is traditional to give temporary appointments to aliens who may be on the planet—I imagine you yourself will be given one in a day or two. But I have been appointed a Royal Host of Mizar and am here to escort you to the Festival."

Manning looked at him with suspicion. "What if I don't want to go to any Festival?" he asked.

"That is your privilege, of course," the Acruxian said. "But may I take the liberty of pointing out that the Mizarians will be deeply offended. Considering the present state of feeling here concerning the Federation and Terrans, it would be most unwise for one who is presumably here as a sort of diplomat."

Against his will, Manning agreed: As a matter of fact, he hadn't intended to refuse; he'd merely been expressing some of the annoyance he was feeling. But he certainly had no intention of passing up the chance to spend as much time in the company of Dtilla Raishelle as he could. There would probably be no quicker way of finding out what the Acruxian was up to.

He wanted to leave Nisa in the hotel, but she looked so disappointed at the suggestion that he relented.

"By the way, my dear friend," Dtilla said as the three of them left the hotel, "I'm sure you won't mind a bit of frankness on my part. When we last met on Regulus, I fear that I was not familiar with the special qualities of the great Manning Draco. As a result, you were able to trick me in a most ignoble fashion. Since then, however, I have corrected the state of my ignorance and the situation will now be quite different."

"Maybe," Manning grunted. "What are you doing here—or, rather, what do you claim is your legitimate reason for being here?"

"Both are the same," the Acruxian said. "I am here as an official representative of my government. My function is merely to act in a friendly fashion to the Mizarians, so that they will not be unduly influenced by the vicious Federation propaganda about us."

"Yeah?" Manning said. "Dtilla, you should write a book called 'How To Win Friends and Influence Mizarians.' It would probably be a best seller—in the light fiction class."

IV

DTILLA RAISHELLE was driving an official ground vehicle and he took them quickly across town to the area that had been turned over to the Festival. It was a section which normally

*The newcomer was, of course, Dtilla Raishelle, the Acruxian, whom Manning had last encountered on Regulus. Dtilla was the chief agent provocateur for Acrux.

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was a park, probably fifty acres in size. At first glance, it seemed almost like a festival ground on Terra. Various types of temporary buildings had been erected, most of them made out of cheap plastic in various bright colors. Most of them were also influenced in design by either the egg or the nest. Manning had noticed the same influence in the more permanent architecture as they had driven through the city streets.

These temporary buildings housed a great variety of games and exhibits. When he stopped to examine the games closely, Manning discovered they were completely alien and yet there was something familiar about them, as though it were impossible for any festival anywhere to be very different from all other festivals. There was even a large stadium with a well-turfed center which might have been meant to be a playing field.

"Egg contest," Dtilla explained when he asked about it. "The climax of this whole affair."

"Egg contest?"

"Yeah. Every mother brings her unhatched eggs here on the final day of the Festival and a judge decides which is the most beautiful egg."*

There were also a great variety of rides, most of these being some sort of underwater rides, but except for that difference they might well have originated on Terra. Then Manning caught sight of a building which was even more familiar. He stopped and stared at the sign which was over the entrance—a sign which was prepared in several languages.

MYSTO THE GREAT

Know what the future holds in store for you! Now, for the first time on Mizar, Mysto the Great is available to tell you of the events which are yet to come! Mysto the Great sees all! Mysto the Great knows all! Mysto the Great tells all! Exclusive seer to his Royal Mostness, Emperor Alis Volat!

"A fortune teller," Manning exclaimed.

"Something like that," Dtilla Raishelle said. "Now over here, we have—" He went on explaining how one of the games worked, but Manning paid no attention. He was more interested in the idea of a Mizarian fortune teller.

It was certainly doing more business than any other building on the grounds. There was a steady stream of Mizarians going in and out of the building of Mysto the Great.

After a time, Manning noticed something else. Any number of Mizarians brushed by him on their way into the fortune teller's and paid absolutely no attention to him. Yet invariably the same Mizarians, on exiting, would look at him with hostility. Some of them even muttered under their breaths, while others went so far as to clack their bills angrily as they strode past him. His curiosity began to be more than idle.

"Just a minute," he said when Dtilla finally tried to lead them to another part of the grounds. "I think I'd like to have my fortune told."

"That is a foolishness for children," the Acruxian said waspishly. "Now, if you'll come along with me, I'll show you one of the most interesting sights here. Right over there, they have a collection of—"

"Later, Buster," Manning interrupted. "Right now I want to have my fortune told."

"It is a waste of time," grumbled Dtilla. "We should have to wait in line and besides the Mizarians might resent it if three aliens were to intrude on such a popular booth."

KNOWING that it was probably a waste of time, Manning Draco still tried a lightning mental stab at the Acruxian. As he had expected, Dtilla's secondary shield was too strong for him—but even so he caught a brief impression of unease before the shield locked into place. It was all he had been looking for and he felt satisfied. Especially so when Dtilla gave him a reproachful look.

*Basically, as Manning had observed to himself, things were not so different here. He even discovered later that there was a popular Mizarian song which was called: "I'll Bet You Were a Beautiful Egg."

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"I hate show-offs," the Acruxian announced. "I am well aware that you are the only Terran with a secondary mind shield and that you have far more telepathic power than anyone on your planet, but I must say it's a little childish of you to do that. And hopeless."

"Is it?" Manning asked. He grinned, his good spirits suddenly restored. "Come on, my fine Acruxian, I am going to have my fortune told."

"But—"

"I insist," Manning said firmly. "Wouldn't you like your fortune told, Nisa?"

"I already know my fortune," she said, "but it might be nice to listen to yours."

Dtilla Raishelle shrugged and followed the two of them into the line before the building.

When they finally reached the entrance, the three of them entered together. Manning had already anticipated something of the sort, so he was not surprised when the Acruxian cried out as they entered the dimly-lighted room.

"Mysto the Great, I, a Royal Host, bring you a most distinguished and famous guest from a far off planet, one who in his way is famous throughout the galaxy as Manning Draco."

Manning grinned and knew he was on the right track. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Enter—and welcome," said a muffled voice.

Mysto the Great sat behind a large table on which a number of cards were placed in such a manner that he could see them but his visitor could not. In the dim light, his bulky figure could be seen, but that was about all. Some sort of white robe covered him so completely that no part of the seer could be seen.

As he sat down on the other side of the table, Manning tried a mental probe of the figure in front of him. He came up against a blank wall which he recognized as a shield and not the natural mental block which the Mizarians possessed.

"What is it you wish?" the muffled voice asked.

"You're a fortune teller," Manning said casually. "Why don't you just go ahead and tell me."

There was a pause, then the voice spoke again from behind the layers of cloth. "Know you, O Terran, that certain arts of fortune telling—*l'art de tirer les cartes*—is reserved for the Sons of the Doctrine and that only I, Mysto the Great, hold the Key to the Mysteries of the Universe.

"From the cards I see that your life is dominated by the Magus, or Juggler, the caster of the dice and mountebank, in the world of vulgar trickery. The Magus, which is of the Greater Arcana, signifies that unity which is the mother of numbers and—"

Before anyone could guess what he was doing, Manning reached over and grabbed one of the cards. He turned the face and looked at it. It showed a heavily robed young man standing behind a table. Above his head was the symbol of infinity, looking like the figure 8 in a horizontal position. On the table in front of him were a pentacle, a sword, a cup, and a staff. Flowers and vines grew around the legs of the table.

"I thought that sounded a little familiar," Manning said. "Now what sort of a Mizarian fortune teller would use cards which originated on Terra and were once known as the Tarot?"

"You," the muffled voice exclaimed angrily, "have defiled the sacred presence. I will not—"

Manning leaned forward quickly, grabbed a handful of the white cloth and yanked on it. It had been wrapped on carelessly, and quickly, and the whole robe came away in his hand. For the second time that day Manning Draco found himself gazing on a familiar countenance. But this one was even more familiar.

The fortune teller was a certain Rigelian known as Dzanku Dzanku.

"That tears it," Dzanku said and stood up.

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THERE were certain similarities between Dzanku and the Acruxian. Dzanku was shorter, being only a few inches over six feet tall. His thick, square torso was supported by only two tree-like legs, but in the matter of tentacles he was two up on the Acruxian, having a total of six. His face, the same grayish color as his body, was small and devoid of expression. Three eyestalks loomed over the top of his face.

"Manning, old friend." he said. "I can't tell you what a surprise it is to see you. It must be eight or nine months since we last met—although, truthfully, it seems like only yesterday."

"What are you doing here?" Manning demanded.

"Just trying to turn an honest credit or two," Dzanku said innocently. One of his eyestalks swiveled in the direction of Nisa Brioshe. "Ah, Manning, you sly dog you! I see you are up to your old tricks. You always did have an eye for a good-looking female—although I must admit I thought you might reform after your marriage."

"This is Nisa Brioshe, *a friend*," Manning said coldly.

"Miss Brioshe is from Rasalague," Dtilla put in, "but she just happens to be along with Manning. On her way to Terra, I understand."

"I am charmed," Dzanku said. He inclined all three of his eyestalks toward her. "My name is Dzanku Dzanku, since our friend Manning is too ill-mannered to introduce us. I regret that I am not more humanoid in form or I would make Manning more aware of what a charming—ah—*friend* he has."

"Enough of this," Manning cut in. "I still want to know what you're doing here. It's almost nine months since I sent you and Sam Warren and Pisha Paisha to the first planet in the system of Caph.* It should have taken you at least fifty or a hundred years to escape from there and even so the patrol should have caught you on the way out."

"It was clever of you," Dzanku admitted, "but not quite clever enough. I fear, my dear Manning, that the flaw in your reasoning was that you based everything on the fact that the Caphians on the first planet had never gone in for interplanetary travel."

"You mean they had?"

"No, but the only reason they hadn't was that they didn't have any desire to do so. They like their own planet and don't have any desire to meet other worlds. You might call it a bucolic attitude, but they're quite happy about the whole thing. They have, however, a very efficient fission power which they use industrially. You wouldn't be interested in all the sordid details, but they were quite happy to help me convert it to use in the ship in which I arrived. By pushing ourselves, it took only twenty-two hours from the time we landed until we were ready to leave.* So only eight months had passed by the time we left the Time Fracture. As for the patrol, it was a simple matter to dodge them." He waved his tentacles modestly.

"And I suppose," Manning said drily, "it's merely a coincidence that you and Dtilla Raishelle both show up here and that you both were anxious for me not to know you were present?"

"Of course, dear fellow," the Acruxian said.

DZANKU DZANKU stared speculatively at Manning out of his three

*See The Caphian Caper in Thrilling Wonder for December 1952. Caph I is in a Time Fracture which so distorts time in relation to the rest of the galaxy that while a week passed on Caph I five years would go by in the outside universe. Knowing that Caph I had never developed spaceships, Manning had Dzanku there with barely enough fuel to reach the planet. He had felt certain it would take at least two months, or fifty years galaxy time, for Dzanku to escape.

*As it was later learned, Caph I had managed to discover two new atomic elements unknown in the rest of the galaxy. They had also invented their own version of the Fermi-egg. Briefly, they put the nuclei of Arcturium-216 (123 on the atomic table) in their Caphotron and when its neutrons are captured by the A-229 isotope, the resulting nuclei are inherently unstable and emitting two electrons one after another, are transformed into the nuclei of two new elements known as Alphardonium and Spicanium, atomic numbers 147 and 148. If there are any amateur scientists in the audience who would like to manufacture their own Alphardonium, the formula is as follows:

$$_{92}A^{216} + {}_{0}n^{1} \rightarrow {}_{92}A^{217} + \text{radiation}$$

$$_{92}A^{217} \rightarrow {}_{93}As^{217*} + e$$

$$_{93}As^{217} \rightarrow {}_{94}Sp^{217} + e$$

And that's all there is to it. However, the use of the Fermi-egg is not to be confused with that of the more popular hen's egg.

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eyes. "You know, cousin," he said, speaking to Dtilla, "Manning and I have known each other a long time and upon a few occasions have been rather close. I have a very high opinion of his ability. I think that under the circumstances we might be perfectly frank with him."

"As you think, cousin*," Dtilla replied.

"Hold on to your scarves, honey," Manning said in an aside to Nisa. "When Dzanku Dzanku decides to be frank it's time for honest folk to head for a storm cellar."

"Manning, you wound me deeply," Dzanku said. "I presume you are aware of the rather peculiar talent which Mizarians possess?"

Manning nodded.

"Actually," Dzanku continued, "it's always been a rather useless talent. Oh, very handy in such things as chess, checkers, Castorian Rummy, and possibly Tzitsa, if they were only clever enough to play it—and, of course, as you Terrans were quick to realize, it is an ability which would be most valuable in pilots of fighting ships. But all it has meant to the Mizarians is some mild amusement, something to while away a long dull day. I presume that once it served them a purpose in their days of hand to hand fighting, but this is all it has meant to them for many generations. Being such a limited talent, however, it has created in them the desire for more of the same. If you were to study Mizarian history, you would discover that they wasted much of their time trying out all forms of fortune telling. This brings us up to me and my use of what you so astutely recognized as ancient Terran Tarot cards."

"I wondered if we were going to get around to that," Manning murmured.

"As you know," Dzanku continued blandly, "my good cousin is interested in furthering his own aims as opposed to those of the Federation. Since Mizar has been about to join the Federation, he did not want to break any laws in trying to convince the Mizarians that this was not to their best interests. So he is here, being merely the good friend which he is. And I am doing a rather rousing business as a fortune teller—I'm really quite good at it—specializing in pointing out the future as it will be if the Mizarians permit themselves to become a part of a Federation dominated by Terrans. This is a rather easy matter for me since I have had considerable contact with Terrans."

"Most of the time to the Terrans' sorrow," Manning observed. "So you are responsible for the anti-Federation feeling that is growing here?"

"I like to think that I have at least nurtured it," Dzanku said with pride. "I understand, my dear Manning, that you are no longer an insurance investigator, but are now representing the Federation, so I would like to point out there is nothing illegal in my activity, as distasteful as you may find it. As I said before, I am merely turning an honest credit or so."

"That's an implausible idea if I ever heard one," Manning said.

"I give you my word," said Dzanku solemnly. "I have learned that the life of crime is a path beset with thorns and stones—not precious stones, I hasten to add. I have determined to rehabilitate myself as a useful member of society. I am thinking of writing my memoirs so that the young and impressionable may benefit by my horrible example. In fact, I was intending to dedicate it to Manning Draco—the man who taught me that crime doesn't pay."

"Very touching," Manning said drily. "By the way, where is Sam Warren?"

"Sam?" Dzanku said. "Good old Sam? Why I haven't seen him since—"

This ringing declaration was ruined by the sudden opening of a door back of Dzanku. A rather slight Terran, with a shrewd face, burst into the room. He was easily recognized as the Terran who had so long worked with the Rigelian.

"Dzanku," he cried, "I've just learned that Manning—" He broke off as he

*Neither Dzanku nor Dtilla were using this term loosely since the two races are related—Acruxians being, in a manner of speaking, sport model Rigelians.

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caught sight of the others in the room.

Manning laughed. "Since you haven't seen Sam in such a long time," he said, "I wouldn't think of intruding on what I am sure will be a tender reunion. I'll see you boys around. Come on, Nisa."

With the pretty little Rasalaguan following him, Manning left the building. They walked past the long line of glowering Mizarians who were waiting to have their futures foretold. After a number of inquiries and several rebuffs, they finally found a public vehicle which would return them to the hotel.

On the way, without completely revealing his own mission, Manning told her about Dzanku, Sam, and Dtilla Raishelle. The mere fact that Dzanku had been trying to conceal Sam Warren's presence was enough to prove that they had some scheme other than the one they had revealed so frankly, but Manning couldn't guess what it might be. Actually, he was merely talking aloud more than telling her, but she hung on his every word.

Back at the hotel, it was with some difficulty that he finally persuaded Nisa that she should retire to her own room. Then he made certain that the connecting door was locked, propped a chair up against it, and with a wry smile—for the situation of Manning Draco trying to protect himself from an ardent female was indeed a switch—went to bed.

V

MANNING was up early the following morning. He'd already decided his first step would be to try to see the Emperor. He had intended to slip out before Nisa was up, but she must have heard him moving around in the room for she knocked on the connecting door almost as soon as he was up.

They had breakfast served in Manning's room. Nisa was dressed in the same scanty costume she had worn the day before and there were times when Manning, sitting across from her, found it difficult to concentrate on eating. Although it was an age when women dressed lightly throughout the galaxy, Rasalaguans went a little farther in this direction than any other peoples.*

They had barely finished breakfast when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Manning called.

The door opened and a Mizarian entered. It was the Royal equerry who had met them the day before. From the expression on his face, it was quite obvious he didn't feel any friendlier than he had the first time.

"Terran Manning Draco," he said, "it is the wish of his Royal Mostness, Emperor Alis Volat, that you be given the honor of being the Royal Egg Judge for the duration of the Festival. Although the chief egg contest will take place on the last day of the Festival, there will be a number of sub-egg contests before, starting with today. In each case, it will be your duty to judge which is the most beautiful egg."

"I appreciate the honor," Manning said solemnly, knowing that to him one egg had always looked like another. "By the way, I'd like to apologize for anything I may have said yesterday which gave offense." He'd decided he had better try to repair his diplomatic bridges.

The equerry acted as if he hadn't heard the apology. "His Royal Mostness also requests your presence at the Royal Palace. At once."

"Fine," Manning said. "I was about to request an audience with Emperor Alis Volat. Nisa, you'll have to stay here until I return."

"All right, Manning," she said submissively.

The equerry drove him to the palace. He answered briefly any questions Manning put to him, but otherwise dis-

*There were many people who considered this pretty brazen of the Rasalaguans, but actually they were a highly moral race. It was eventually learned that in terms of their own culture and their biological make-up the Rasalaguans dressed far more modestly than any other race. Due to the Terran way of looking at such things, however, there was a period when visiscreen producers and advertisers tried to find ways of working a Rasalaguan into every story and every ad in order to have an excuse for showing one of these charming females. Their efforts came to nothing as the Rasalaguans refused to be photographed under any conditions. This explains why so few Terrans were familiar with Rasalaguans.

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couraged conversation. When they arrived at the palace—a huge edifice built in the shape of an egg—he drove past the front entrance and around to the rear.

"It is thought wiser if you go in the back way," he explained. "As you may have discovered, many Mizarian subjects do not feel too friendly to Terrans. It might create disturbances if it were known that His Mostness was receiving a Terran."

"Won't they also object to my being an egg judge?" Manning asked.

"No. It is realized that visitors must be given such honors. And of course if you show an aptitude for judging eggs that may mitigate some of the feeling about you."

HE PARKED the land vehicle near the rear entrance and they got out. They had to pick their way through a number of large cans, resembling Terran garbage cans. Because of the similarity, Manning assumed that's what they were until he happened to look in one of the cans. It was filled to the top with what appeared to be gold dust. He stopped and scooped up a handful. It was gold dust.

"What's this?" he asked in amazement.

The equerry glanced briefly at the can. "Garbage," he said.

"What?"

"Garbage," the equerry repeated patiently.

"Royal type garbage?" Manning asked drily.

"All of our garbage is gold," the Mizarian said coldly.

"Why?" Manning asked. "Fillings drop out of your teeth while you're eating, or something like that?"

"Mizarians," the equerry explained, "have teeth only when they are very young. The teeth then wear out and are replaced by the horny plates of the adult."

"How does that explain the gold garbage?"

"Our food is essentially the same as it was for our ancestors—various succulent insects, shellfish, and perhaps a little algae to round it out. We have discovered, however, that we have better health and live longer if we obtain more variety in minerals and vitamins. We have learned to obtain these directly from the ocean—and each house is equipped with its own vitamin plant, with intake pipes leading from the house into the ocean. Unfortunately, the same process which extracts vitamins from sea water also extracts gold. It then has to be separated and thrown out."

"What happens to it then?" Manning asked as they entered the palace.

"Garbage collectors pick it up daily and it is taken to a central fission plant. There, at considerable expense to the royal exchequer, it is transmuted into elements easier to dispose of. I imagine that it's not much different from the garbage problems on other worlds."

"Well—only a little," Manning said drily.

Moments later he was being ushered into the presence of the emperor of Mizar. The latter looked much like the other Mizarians Manning had seen except that his bill was yellow with age. He sat on a throne which was shaped like a nest.

"We are pleased to see you before us," the emperor said when Manning was announced. He clapped his hands sharply and cried out: "Bring to us the youngest prince of the House of Volat."

A servant came running in, carrying a huge scarlet pillow. In the very center of the pillow there was a solitary egg. It was light blue in color and looked to be about four inches long and perhaps two and a half inches in diameter at the thickest section.

"Look well upon our youngest son," the emperor said to Manning.

Manning looked, but it still looked like any other egg to him. "Very—er—handsome," he said lamely.

"Naturally," the emperor conceded. "This is his Royal Youthful Mostness,

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the Prince Pyes Razestans Volat. You will recognize him the next time you see him?"

"Of course," Manning lied.

The emperor waved to the servant and the egg was carried from the room. "We have requested your presence," the emperor said, "because it has occurred to us that you may not be familiar with all of our customs and we have just appointed you Judge of the Royal Egg Contest. The youngest prince of our house will be entered in that contest and we wished you to understand that your judgment should not be influenced by the fact that he is our son. He should be awarded first prize only if in your detached opinion he is the most beautiful."

"Of course," Manning said, drily.

"That is all," the Emperor said in dismissal.

"Just a minute, Your Mostness," Manning said. "I had intended to request an audience this morning and perhaps I can speak to you of a matter which concerns me."

"The audience is granted. Speak."

"I have been concerned," Manning said, "by the amount of anti-Federation and anti-Terran feeling I have seen among your people and by the knowledge that this may still affect your intention of joining the Federation."

"As you can see," the Emperor replied, "We share none of this feeling ourselves. We insisted on joining the Federation because we feel the advantages are greater than the disadvantages. There has, however, always been a small political party on Mizar which has been opposed to any sort of relationship with Terra because of your disgusting habit of eating—eggs. Recently, we understand that this has been growing."

"Fostered by two other aliens, Dtilla Raishelle of Acrux, and Dzanku Dzanku of Rigel."

"So we understand," the Emperor said. "They have not, however, broken any of our laws—we do rather pride ourselves on our free speech. It is also true that if this continues, we must bow to the will of our people and withdraw from the Federation."

"Are you sure that Dzanku Dzanku and Dtilla Raishelle are engaged in no other activity bearing on this?" Manning asked.

"According to our Royal Egg Watchers—what you would call police on your world—they have not."

Manning thought about it a moment. "Can Your Mostness suggest any course of action which might influence the matter in either direction?"

"Your own actions will influence it," the Emperor said. "The actions of any Terran would influence it. If you carry off your temporary position well, it may counteract what the others are doing. Should you offend our people or break any of our laws, it would most certainly be the deciding factor in swinging all of our people against joining the Federation. Now, Manning Draco, it distresses us to end this audience, but we believe your are due at a preliminary egg contest and you must be there promptly."

Manning thanked him and left. The equerry was waiting to drive him to the festival and they went there directly. Manning had a slight twinge of conscience about leaving Nisa Brioshe waiting at the hotel, but it was also a relief to get away from her great, staring orange eyes.

A LARGE crowd of Mizarians was already gathered in the stadium at the Festival. A huge table and reviewing stand had been constructed in the center of it and the table was already covered with pillows of many different colors. On each pillow there was an egg. So far as Manning could see, they all looked exactly alike.

The equerry let Manning out not far from the stadium and drove off. A small group of Mizarians awaited Manning's approach. He was not surprised to notice that among them were Dtilla Raishelle, Dzanku Dzanku, and Sam Warren.

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"I am Insta Tuquo," the leader of the delegation said. He introduced the others. "I believe," he added, "that you already know our other three distinguished visitors."

Manning nodded.

"As you may know," Insta Tuquo continued, each has to have an assistant. In honor of your own origins, we have appointed Mr. Sam Warren as your assistant."

"I can hardly wait," Manning murmured.

Sam Warren grinned. "We'll knock them dead, Manning," he said.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you meant that literally," Manning replied. "I don't know why you want to be my assistant, but just watch your step. Don't try to pull any fast ones."

"Me?" Sam exclaimed with injured innocence.

Manning wasn't fooled. He'd decided that the best he could do was to keep his eyes open and hope he could catch Sam in an anti-Terran conspiracy.

The Mizarians explained that there were still a few entries to arrive and left Manning and Sam on the reviewing stand. A moment later Dzanku strolled over to join them.

"So nice to see you again, Manning," he said. "Where is that luscious little female you brought with you?"

DRACO opened his mouth to reply, but his answer was forever lost to posterity for at that moment one of the Mizarian mothers in the crowd let out a piercing scream. This brought everyone running and for several moments there was so much confusion that it was impossible to find out what had happened. But finally everyone else quieted down enough so that the hysterical mother could be heard.

"Someone," she shrilled, "has taken my baby."

Everyone glanced at the table. Sure enough, one of the pillows was now empty.

Several of the other mothers hastened to comfort the bereaved parent. In the meantime, the official committee, faces grim and bills a-quiver, strode to the reviewing stand.

"It is impossible," cried Insta Tuquo, "that a Mizarian would do such a dastardly deed. The aliens must be searched."

It was all happening so quickly that Manning Draco had no time to guess what was going on. Before he could move, a couple of the Mizarians had grabbed him and were searching him. There was a hoarse cry from one of them and he drew a blue egg from Manning's pocket.

"My baby," cried the woman as she recognized it.

"Wait a minute," Manning said, aware of the hostile glances from every direction. "I didn't take that egg. Someone must have put it in my pocket while I was talking to Dzanku—" He broke off and glanced at the Rigelian. "So that was it? You came over to talk to me just to give Sam or Dtilla a chance to grab that egg and put it in my pocket."

"Tut-tut," Dzanku said. "I'm afraid he's really flipped his jets. Everyone knows that Rigelians not only don't eat eggs, but have the utmost respect for them."

"He's right," growled one of the Mizarians. He had Manning firmly by the arm. "Come on, you! We have ways of taking care of eggnappers like you."

VI

MANNING DRACO had been in jail for almost a week. Nisa Brioshe had been in to see him twice. The first time he had asked her to get in touch with J. Barnaby Cruikshank and tell him what had happened, but when she returned she told him that she hadn't been permitted to make any calls or send any messages out of Mizar.

Nisa didn't come back after the second visit and the warder told him that he wasn't permitted any more visitors. The guards spoke to him no more than they

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had to, usually delivering his meals in complete silence. Although he was not served Terran food, he had no complaint other than the monotony of his diet. It consisted exclusively of shellfish and red algae.

He was surprised, therefore, on the morning of the seventh day when the warder came clumping back to the cell shortly after the morning meal.

"Visitor for you," he announced surlily. He unlocked the cell door and led Manning to the visiting room. Manning entered, expecting to find Nisa again, but it was Dtilla Raishelle, the Acruxian, with a glint of triumph in his eyes.

"This," he said, "is the kind of setting in which I like to see you, Manning Draco. How do you like it, my fine simian friend?"

Manning snorted. "Did you just drop around to gloat?"

"Not at all," Dtilla said. "I have the honor of being your attorney."

"What?"

"I have been appointed to defend you on the most serious charge of eggnapping."

"I'm sunk," Manning groaned. "I demand the right to have an attorney from Terra."

"Can't be arranged, old boy."

"But you and Dzanku framed me. Now you're going to be my attorney. The next thing I suppose you'll tell me that Dzanku is going to be the judge."

"Unfortunately, we couldn't arrange that," the Acruxian said gravely.

"What," Manning groaned, "is the penalty for eggnapping?"

The Acruxian was obviously enjoying himself. "The convicted criminal is sentenced to walk out through the waterlock—without any underwater suit."

"How far down are we?"

"About three miles below the surface," Dtilla said. His tentacles waved with pleasure. "I think we've managed the whole thing quite well, don't you?"

"You admit you framed me?" Manning said.

"In the privacy of this room, where no one else can hear me, yes. You'll be interested to know that tomorrow—today is the last day of the festival—the Emperor will announce that Mizar is not joining the Federation. I expect that shortly afterwards a treaty will be signed between Mizar and Acrux. We are grateful to you, Manning. Perhaps I can get my government to bestow some honor on you—posthumously, of course."

"Okay," Manning said drily, "you've had your fun. Scram!"

"Oh, there is one other thing," Dtilla said. "It seems that the Egg Festival on Mizar is a joyous occasion and it is the custom to be lenient toward crimes committed during the festival. In normal cases, this amounts to a pardon. Your crime, however, was too horrible for anything like that. But there is one way you can be released from prison—today."

Manning knew there was a catch in it or Dtilla wouldn't be telling him about it. "How?" he asked.

"The law states that one accused of a crime committed during the festival may be released on the last day of the festival if he challenges his accuser or accusers to mortal combat. It is considered that this combat becomes a test of guilt in the eyes of the gods and if he wins he is considered innocent. If he loses, then he was obviously properly executed. Officially, I believe, Dzanku and I are both listed as your accusers since Dzanku had earlier predicted that you might try to steal an egg and it was I who suggested to Insta Tuquo that he search you first."

NOW Manning got it. He had some choice. He could stay in prison and most probably be convicted and executed without a chance of getting in touch with the Federation, or he could go out and fight both Dzanku and Dtilla at the same time. It would make little difference in the long run. Manning had no illusions about it. He had gotten the best of Dzanku Dzanku a number of times and of Dtilla Raishelle once, but he h[illegible] been in position to use trickery to so[illegible] degree. In an open contest, with or

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out weapons, he would be no match for even one of them. No Terran could match the strength of an Acruxian or a Rigelian, nor could even Manning match them with mental strength.

Still he did not waver in his choice. Once he was outside, there might be something he could turn to his own advantage.

"I'll challenge you," he said.

"Good," Dtilla exclaimed.

With that he turned and left the room.

In less than an hour three guards arrived and took Manning out of the prison. They drove directly to the Festival and they led him into the stadium. It was filled with festive Mizarians. In the middle section, there was a scarlet canopy over the royal box. Evidently the big egg contest had just taken place, for the table with all the eggs on it was still just below the spot where the Emperor sat. Manning could see that the winning ribbon was around the egg which rested on the scarlet pillow. Evidently whoever had succeeded Manning as judge had interpreted the Emperor's little speech the same way he had.

DTILLA RAISHELLE and Dzanku Dzanku were already out in the center of the stadium. They waited patiently as Manning walked slowly toward them, trying in vain to think of some way out of this. If he could only find some way to throw both of them off guard at the same time, he might do something with mental force. But he knew if he attacked only one, his mind would be vulnerable to the blasting force of the other.

Dtilla Raishelle waved his tentacles as Manning drew near and the excited murmur of the crowd quieted.

"We are pleased to accept your challenge, Manning Draco," he said, "knowing that justice will triumph and that you will prove yourself guilty as charged. Although it is not required by law, Dzanku and myself have come into the stadium unarmed. We do not want to take undue advantage of you."

"Not much," Manning murmured as he stared at them. Each of them weighed at least a ton. Between them they possessed ten tentacles, each one of which was powerful enough to crush a man.

"We have chosen," Dtilla continued, "to leave it simply a contest of strength. Are you ready, Manning Draco?"

"No," Manning said truthfully. "I'd like a little time to limber up my muscles —say about eight or ten years."

"You know," Dzanku said, speaking for the first time, "I rather regret the way this is ending. I've always been rather fond of Manning and he really deserves a better chance. Couldn't we just exile him somewhere?"

"No," snapped Dtilla. "You agreed to take my orders. Such softness is unworthy of a Rigelian, a cousin of the mighty Acruxians. You know what will happen if I report your softness to Rigel?"

"I know," Dzanku said. "Well, let's get it over with. Sorry Manning, old friend."

The two of them began a slow methodical approach toward Manning, their tentacles flicking nervously with the tension. The crowd was hushed and expectant.

Manning's first thought was to run, but he knew it to be futile. He'd never raced against an Acruxian or a Rigelian, but he had an idea they could outrun him too. And the hoped-for inspiration still had not come.

Then something happened so swiftly that it was a full minute before Manning realized what it was. He felt a force strike him, even though they were still several yards away; then he had an impression of flying through the air. The next moment he dropped with a thump. It had happened in perhaps ten seconds. It took him the other fifty seconds to realize he was no longer out in the corner of the stadium. He was seated up in the stadium proper. Next to him was Nisa Brioshe.

As his senses returned to him, Manning was aware of the surprised cries from the crowd. Looking down into the

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field, he realized this action had not been the only startling thing. Dtilla Raishelle and Dzanku Dzanku, their tentacles threshing madly, were both floating in the air fifteen feet above the ground.

It took a few more seconds to connect what had happened with the girl who sat next to him. He noticed the air of concentration on her face.

"You did it?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, without taking her eyes from the two figures out over the field.

"How?"

"Didn't you know?" she asked, sounding surprised. "We of Rasalague are natural teleports. That is why we find it so easy to slip into ships that visit our planet."

"So that's what you had in mind when you offered to help me break out of jail?"

"Yes." She frowned. "But what am I going to do now, Manning? They can't do any harm while I hold them up in the air this way, but I don't know what to do with them."

"Can you handle them separately?" he asked. "I mean can you make one of them do one thing and the other something else?"

"Of course."

"And can you teleport anything else while you're also handling them?"

"I brought you up here at the same time I was picking them up," she said simply.

Manning laughed. He leaned over and whispered in her ear. Then he began climbing down out of the stands.

OUT over the field, Dtilla Raishelle began drifting away across the field while Dzanku Dzanku began to revolve like a pinwheel. He was still revolving when Manning arrived on the field directly beneath him. One of his three eyes managed to catch a glimpse of Manning.

"Manning, old friend," he cried, "make her stop whirling me. It's making me dizzy."

"Will you listen to reason?"

"Yes, yes. Anything if you make her stop. You know I can't stand to be dizzy."

Manning waved one arm and the Rigelian stopped revolving. He stared down out of three bleary eyes.

"Oh, dear," he said. "Dtilla is going to be very angry now. He wanted to get rid of that girl before she started teleporting and I talked him out of it."

"Never mind about Dtilla. I don't think he'll be in a position to do you any great damage. Dzanku, I feel obliged toward you for at least trying to stop Dtilla from killing me, and in addition I have an old score to settle with someone else. Dzanku, if I let you go and give you a tip on how you can make a little money, will you and Sam Warren beat it out of here at once without interfering any more?"

"Will we!" exclaimed Dzanku.

"Give me your word of honor as a Rigelian gambler?"*

"I do," Dzanku said with as much dignity as he could muster while hanging fifteen feet in the air.

"Where's Sam?"

"Over by the gate. I telepathed for him to stand by the minute that girl took over."

"All right. I'll have Nisa let you down in a moment. First, I want to give you a tip. You know that our old friend, J. Barnaby Cruikshank is now Secretary of Planets in the Federation government?"

"I'd heard that he was."

"Well, it's a job that takes all of J. Barnaby's time, so he's left the office in charge of Wellington Shardell, the character who used to be in charge of the Terran territory. Now, I happen to know that he's never told Wellington about you and Sam and that he destroyed all the records because he doesn't want anyone to know how you fooled him so many times. So I was thinking that good old Wellington might be very happy to get two enterprising insurance salesmen. Get it?"

*The only time you can believe a Rigelian is when he swears on his gambling oath.

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"Manning, I love you," Dzanku said joyfully. "It's a deal and you have my gambler's word that Sam and I won't be able to get out of here fast enough. This espionage stuff was never in our line anyway. We just took it to tide us over while we looked around."

Manning waved his arm again and Dzanku floated to the ground. He waved to the girl with one tentacle and to Manning with another as he set off across the stadium field. Manning watched and saw Sam Warren join him at the gate. The two of them vanished from sight.

Manning glanced up at Nisa and she nodded. He turned and walked over to stand in front of the royal box. In the meantime, Dtilla Raishelle, his head almost purple with rage, had been floated to the same spot.

"Your Royal Mostness," Manning said, "I beg you to listen to me for a moment."

"We will hear what you have to say, Terran," the Emperor said.

"I hope to prove to you," Manning said, "that the unfortunate incident which put me in jail was entirely the work of this Acruxian who has taken advantage of your gracious hospitality. The whole thing was a plot to discredit me as a Terran envoy. While pretending to fight me, Dtilla Raishelle committed the eggnapping which was the real goal of his nefarious scheme!"

As Manning paused, every eye in the stadium looked down to the table that held the eggs—and saw the empty scarlet pillow.

"The Prince," the Emperor cried hoarsely.

Due to his rage over his helpless position, Dtilla Raishelle was a little slow to grasp what was going on, but he got it as he heard the Emperor's shout. His tentacles hastily fumbled at his pockets and he found the egg in one of them. He drew it out and stared at it a moment. Then his eyestalks swiveled to focus on Manning.

"You did this," he shouted in rage. "You and that freak from Rasalague! You—" The tentacle holding the egg drew back as he prepared to hurl it at Manning.

There was an angry shout from the Emperor. From a dozen spots Royal Egg Watchers aimed and fired their paralyzers. Every muscle of the raging Acruxian was immediately locked. Manning signaled Nisa and she lowered Dtilla to the ground. Eager hands rescued the royal egg while other hands, no less eager, dragged the Acruxian away.

"We rule that you were unjustly accused," the Emperor said to Manning, speaking loudly so that his voice would carry over the entire stadium. "It is clear to us that it is you and the Federation who have always been our friends and that to our shame we were tricked into believing the vile Acruxian. In return for your valiant efforts in saving our Prince Royal, we hereby decree that you, Manning Draco, shall hereafter be recognized as a Royal Egghead of Mizar and accorded all the privileges of our realm, second only to the royal family."

As a roar went up from the crowd, Manning turned and went up into the stands where Nisa was waiting.

"Honey, you were wonderful," he exclaimed, taking her in his arms. "You were wonderful, too—but that doesn't mean that you're invited to come up to my hotel room."

She looked at him and there was a mischievous glint in her orange eyes. Then she stood up on tiptoe and whispered in Manning's ear.

"Honest?" he said.

She nodded.

Manning threw back his head and laughed. He was still laughing when hundreds of friendly Mizarians descended upon him.

VII

EARLY the next day, Manning Draco and Nisa Brioshe were taken to the surface of Mizar in one of the royal sublimousines. They were soon in the *Alpha Actuary* and blasting skyward. Once they were beyond the atmosphere, Man-

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ning threw the ship into magnidrive. Then he motioned to Nisa to stand away from the screen and put in a call to J. Barnaby Cruikshank on Rigil Kentaurus.

"Well, it's all done," he said when J. Barnaby appeared. "Everyone on Mizar dearly loves us and they love me so much that they have made me a Royal Egghead—and if you laugh I'll kill you; it's the highest honor they can give an alien. They're coming into the Federation on schedule. Dtilla Raishelle has been arrested for committing the most serious crime on Mizar and will probably be executed. Acrux won't be able to complain considering the nature of his crime—kidnapping the royal prince."

"Dtilla have any accomplices?" J. Barnaby asked.

"None," Manning lied cheerfully. "It's all tied up."

"I knew you'd do it, my boy. I said—"

"The pictures, J. Barnaby," Manning reminded.

"Eh? Oh, yes, the pictures. To be sure, my boy." While Manning watched, J. Barnaby brought out the photographs and the negatives of the pictures that had been taken in Manning's hotel room and destroyed them. "There you are. It was just a joke, my boy. I wouldn't have used them."

"A very funny joke," Manning said. "By the way, how is my old friend Wellington making out running Greater Solarian while you're gone?"

"Quite well," J. Barnaby said. "I understand he's having a little trouble getting good salesmen, but otherwise he's doing fine and I'm sure he'll solve that problem."

"I'm sure he will, too," Manning said. "Give him my love the next time you talk to him. Oh, yes, there's one more thing, J. Barnaby. You mentioned that I might obtain a concession on Mizar."

"As long as it's not something someone here wants," J. Barnaby said cautiously. "What is it you want?"

"I've already arranged to take over all the garbage collections on Mizar. How about putting the official stamp on it?"

"Garbage collections?" J. Barnaby's face peered out of the screen, his expression indicating that he was doubting his son-in-law's sanity. "What do you want with that?"

"Does anybody else want it?"

"I'm sure they don't," J. Barnaby said promptly. "But—"

"Then approve it," Manning said.

He turned on a recorder while J. Barnaby went through the routine of officially-approving Manning Draco's garbage collecting contract on Mizar.

"But what the blue blazes do you want with barbage?" he demanded again when he had finished. "Isn't there enough garbage on Terra?"

"Oh, I forgot to mention one thing," Manning said lightly. "The garbage on Mizar consists almost entirely of gold."

He broke the connection while the new expression was still forming on J. Barnaby's face.

IT WAS a few hours later when Manning Draco, holding Nisa Brioshe by the hand, arrived home. He strode in through the door and Vega, hearing his footsteps, came running to throw herself into his arms. But just before she reached him, she caught sight of his companion. She stopped short.

"Who's that?" she demanded.

"Oh, this is a new friend of mine," he said with a grin. "This is Nisa Brioshe from Rasalague. Nisa, this is my wife, Vega."

"How do you do," Nisa said. "Your husband has been very kind to me."

"I'll bet," Vega said drily. Her gaze roamed over the other girl. "Especially the way you're dressed. It would naturally play on his—sympathy, if you'll excuse the expression."

"Nisa's a great kid," Manning went on. "She stowed away on my ship when I was heading for Mizar, thinking I was coming to Terra. So she just stayed there with me and then I brought her home."

"Manning Draco," Vega said firmly,

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"tell me truthfully—are you drunk?"

"No."

"Well, I'm going home to my father," she said. "If you think you can brazenly bring that—that—" She was staring in amazement at Nisa. "What's wrong with her?"

Manning looked and saw that Nisa was shaking violently as though in the grip of a terrible chill. Her hands were clawing at the scarf aroud her neck and her face was contorted with a sort of ecstatic pain.

"This is why I brought her home," Manning said softly. "Wait."

Nisa Brioshe stripped the scarves from her throat and from her body. As they fell around her feet, leaving her completely nude, a red line was visible down the center of her body.

As they watched, the line grew even redder. The flesh on her body and her face seemed to be moving with a life of its own. Then, suddenly, she split in two. The complete crack started in the exact center of her face and ran swiftly down her body. And even as it happened, her flesh writhed and flowed—and each leg became two, a new arm appeared on each half, other organs swiftly grew and rounded out. And standing before them were two small, nude figures. One of them was quite obviously male, the other still female.

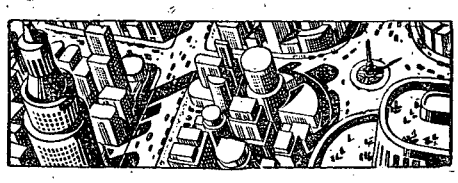
The both smiled shyly at the Dracos, then clasping hands, turned and ran from the house.

"That's the real reason I brought her home," Manning said. "Her fission was about to take place and I didn't want her to have to experience it out on the street.* Although I'll also admit that I thought you might hear about her being with me and I wanted you to see why she wouldn't be interested in me."

"But I don't understand," Vega said. She looked at the scarves on the floor, then stared out in the direction the couple had vanished. "Where were they running to?"

Manning grinned. "I'll explain it to you step by step," he said, "starting with a kiss." He held his arms out and Vega ran into them. She didn't seem to mind in the least that the explanation stopped being vocal at that point.

*Nisa Brioshe had herself told Manning the secret of Rasalaguan mating. When the Rasalaguan is ready for mating, she leaves her own planet and goes to another world. (The reason for this is purely psychological, giving the Rasalaguan a pleasant honeymoon to make up for its shortness.) Sometime shortly after arriving there she divides by fission into a male and a female. As soon as the male has impregnated the female, he dies. The female then returns home to bear her children, all of whom will be female.



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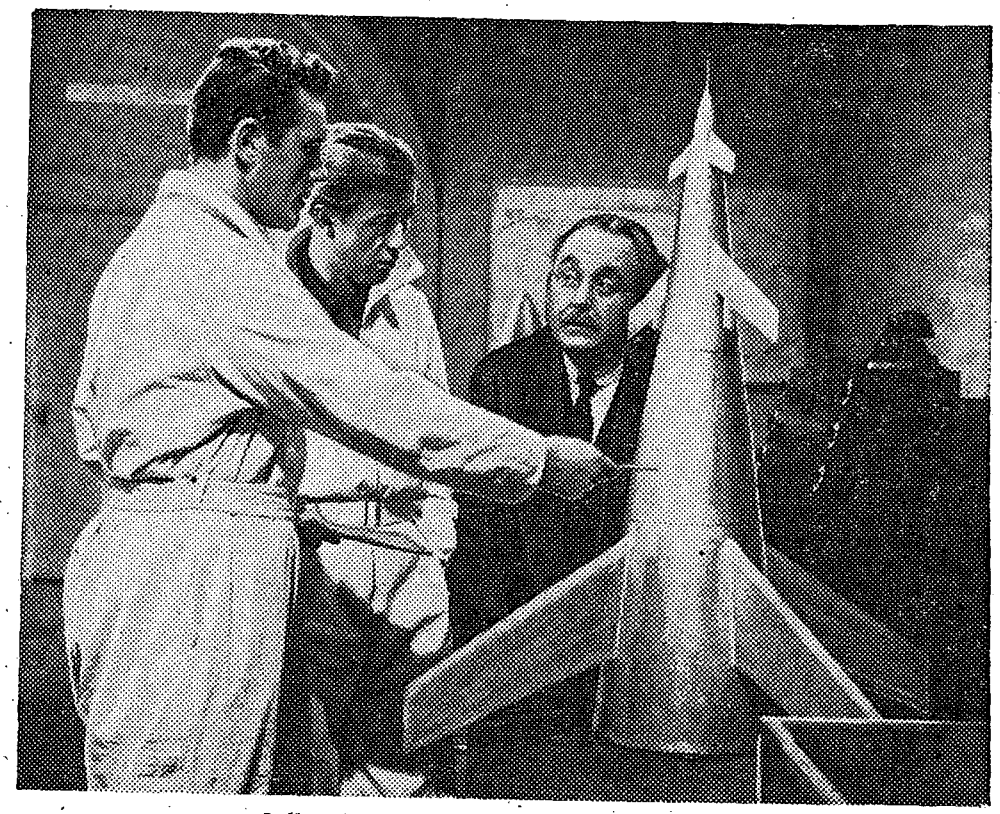

Duff explains the principle of the three stage rocket

Today's Film, SPACEWAYS,

AS YOU KNOW, science and fiction have been running a neck and neck race to see which can catch the public's imagination first. In SPACEWAYS, the current *Lippert Pictures* production, the two would seem to be in a photo finish.

While writing this science fiction drama authors Richard Landau and Paul Tabori felt the gap closing rapidly. Their script was based on experiments with the three-stage rocket and preparations for a space station 1,075 miles above the earth. Both writers were gratified and somewhat chagrined as the picture got underway to see magazines and newspapers featuring numerous studies of space flight and space stations of the very kind which they had visualized.

While the picture was in the works, Los Angeles adman Don Belding even made a speech, similar to one in the movie, to the effect that whoever controls space will control the world. Say the writers, "We didn't even ghost his speech for him." All this testifies to the increasing interest of both science *and* fiction minded people in the approaching age of space.

In the technical production of the movie, special effects men skirted classified material, but the models of the three-stage rockets used in the film were as accurate as we've seen. The television screens showing experimental rats in free fall in space were a realistic touch for which the producer, Michael Carreras, can take full credit.

The two rockets featured in the film, far from being extranaeaous gadgets, are an integral part of the plot.

The first of these is a trial, pilotless rocket designed to become an artificial satellite once beyond earth's gravitational pull. It is to be followed by a second piloted projectile with a magnetic grappling device for contact with the satellite. Both in fact and fiction these will

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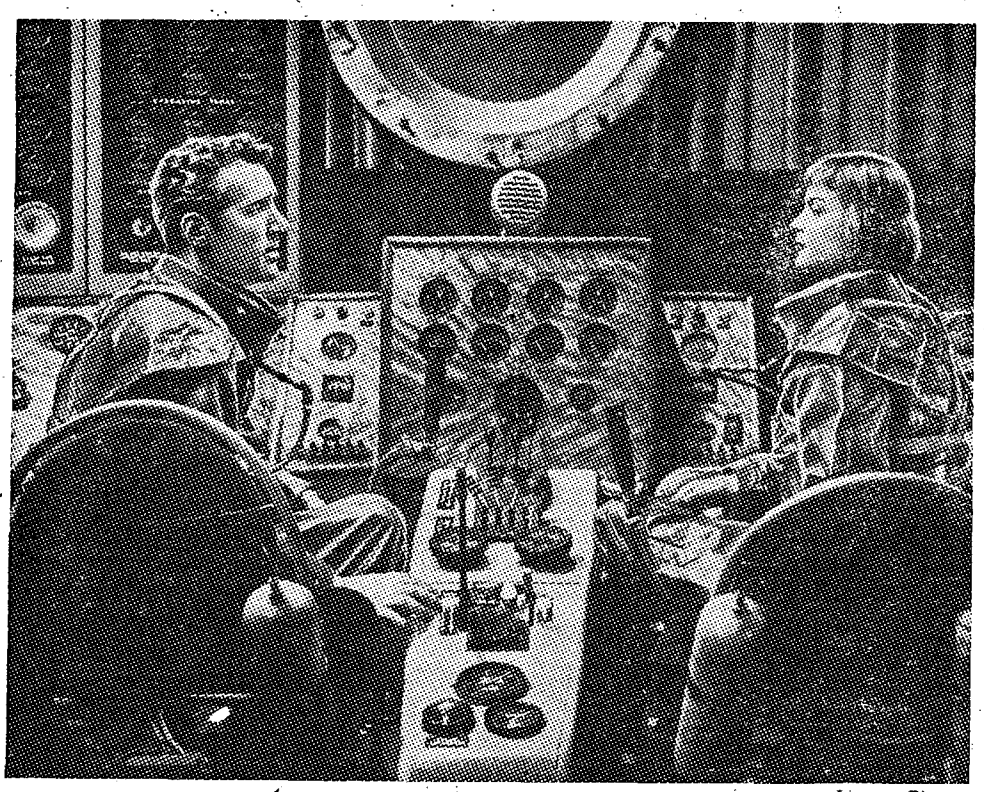

Lippert Pictures

Duff and Bartok—together into space . . .

May Be—Tomorrow's Fact!

probably be man's first faltering steps in his ultimate conquest of space.

American rocket expert, Howard Duff, is sent to England to work on plans for a space station. His preoccupation with his work estranges him from his wife, played by Cecile Chevreau, who is prey for an unscrupulous scientist attached to the secret project.

When the wife and scientist disappear, security restrictions have been so strictly enforced that no way can be seen for the missing couple to have left the testing grounds. Foul play is suspected, and Duff is accused of murder. He is suspected of disposing of the bodies in the rocket satellite now spinning around earth. He must prove himself innocent of the charges against him—and in so doing becomes the first man to enter space. When he is accompanied on this mission by lovely Eva Bartok, the movie reaches its dramatic climax.

The science fiction drama was filmed in England, close to the medieval village of Bray in the Thames Valley. The white oilskins and oxygen masks of the actors and the modernistic launching platform sets made a strange contrast with the thatched roofs of the village cottages.

Local youngsters, less sophisticated by far than America's legion of Captain Video fans, were awed. Parents were heard to threaten erring kiddies with "If you're not good, they'll take you to the moon." When filming continued after dark with intermittent flashes and sound effects, sentries at nearby Windsor Castle were mistakenly alerted.

For the most part, this motion picture from the same studio which made "Breaking Through The Sound Barrier" is above average. It is a science fiction story told in terms of human values, and this is the direction we like to see films take.

—Pat Jones

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MISS ROSA MATTIONI was not the casual type of pretty young thing whom chance acquaintances might familiarly dub "Rosy." She was sufficiently young, all right, and beautiful enough to cause a traffic accident, but when she went into a shop, clerks treated her with the courtesy they ordinarily reserved for elderly bank presidents, and on the street, men frequently tipped their hats to her. A block away, from backside, you could tell that Rosa was a lady.

Mr. Heinkle—the young one—often likened her to a dahlia. Wistfully, for Eric Heinkle considered the dahlia a cold, unresponsive flower, lovely but distant. And he thought of Rosa as Destiny. His own private heritage, for better or for worse. The fact that Rosa had never indicated that she thought their lives were irremediably entwined disturbed, but did not discourage him. In such matters the younger Mr.

Mr. Heinkle's Green Thumb

By CHARLES A. STEARNS

It wasn't the chlorophyll that made the money look so attractive—to the wrong people. . . .

Heinkle had the unflagging determination and industry of a terrier, and in his carefully considered opinion, here was one girl worth waiting for.

The truth is that she was rather fond of Eric Heinkle, and found him attractive in spite of a face that was a trifle red, and a head that was a trifle square.

After all, he had the shoulders of a fullback, and the blond head on the shoulders contained a brain so keenly ingenious that it often alarmed her. And that, as she well knew, is a combination a girl doesn't stumble over every day in the week. Of course, she would rather have died than let him know it.

Certainly there was nothing of the languishing lover about her this morning as she made her way between the banks of red Mattioni roses, bred and named for her. She had, as it were, the look of a queen inspecting her troops.

Old Mr. Heinkle lay sprawled across a bed of new gladiolus shoots, trowel in hand, black pipe protruding from under his white mustache, and a look of intense concentration on his seamed face. He grunted a a friendly greeting, and she favored him with the warm smile she reserved for men past sixty.

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She advanced upon him with slow purposefulness

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Walking through this part of the greenhouse, she held her breath as long as she could, for she held the superstition that the smell of the roses might some day make her pliable and docile as a three day old sweet pea. Actually, she underestimated her own powers of forbearance, but remembering, later on, the madness of those next few days, she called herself a prophet.

It was just that Eric was so unpredictable. You never knew what he'd do next. Content to hide behind the sign of Heinkle & Son, Florists, indulging in private research, he held enough degrees in the botanical sciences to entitle him to teach at the better universities, if he wanted to.

He didn't. He had absolutely no ambition at all, outside of Rosa and his flowers. That was the great rift between them.

WHEN she came into the back room where he was working, the none-too-subtle odor of sick-sweet blossoms, mingled with chemicals and a taint of ozone in the air was wafted to her nostrils. He didn't see her. He was grafting a leafy, green branch onto a naked, alien-looking shrub with which it obviously hadn't the slightest thing in common except that they were both plants.

There were several dozens of outsized Darwin tulips in the wall-boxes. They all bent their heads slowly toward Rosa as she entered, seeming to survey her with polite curiosity.

Her lovely mouth sagged.

Eric turned around with a shy grin. "You like them? They're for you."

"Wh-what makes them nod at people like that?"

"Not people, baby," Eric said. "Just you. They only bow to you."

"How—"

"Real simple. I've been breeding the strain for two years. Have you ever heard of tropism?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, it means 'response to stimulus.' Like some plants turn their petals to the sun in the morning, and others close up at a touch, or a sensation of light or heat. These happen to be Rosa-tropic."

"That's outrageous. I don't believe a word of it!"

Once there had been the lily that changed tints to match the motif of her living room, just by adding chemicals to its soil. Another time there had been the creamy-white night-blooming cereus that was so adjusted by Eric that it burst into blossoms only on her birthdays. But this! It was too much.

"Don't look like that," Eric laughed. "I can explain. Remember that bottle of your favorite perfume I gave you three Christmases ago?"

"Of course. What's that got to do with it?"

"I bought two bottles and kept one to experiment with. Bred a strain of tulips that are acutely sensitive to its odor. Get it?"

Rosa tried not to look impressed. "So that's it," she said. "Well, I'm sorry to inform you that it won't work, because I'm going to stop using your perfume. And here—you can have this piece of gold-wash back too." She flung a glittering diamond on the table.

Eric contrived to show the full extent of the pain he felt. In the first place, the ring was eighteen carat, and the stone was real. In the second place he knew exactly what was wrong.

"Would it be too much to ask?" he said.

"At 11:35 a.m.," Rosa told him with statistical accuracy, "you were seen kissing a woman behind the potted syringa up front, who definitely was not your Aunt Mabel. Gloria Sweeney saw you. Is there anything more you'd like to know about your two-timing self?"

"Good old Gloria!" said Eric, after a moment of pseudo reverent silence. "I saw her too, you know, and the woman wasn't my Aunt Mabel, it's true, though God knows she was old enough to be, and she kissed me, not the reverse. I've been trying to figure out why ever since.

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I didn't know her from Eve."

"Very likely."

"It's the truth, dammit. Dad was out, and I had one of the orchids in my hand I'd been experimenting with, and I asked her if I could help her, please, and she said, 'Oh, what a pretty thing!' sniffed the orchid, and threw her arms around me like a long-lost sister. I tell you, I had quite a time getting away from her."

"Naturally," Rosa said. "And the part about the orchid is especially good. Orchids don't have an odor. Even I know enough about flowers to know that."

"Ah-ha!" said Eric triumphantly, "but these orchids do! They're something special I've been saving to surprise you with. Imagine, if you can, black orchids that smell like roses! I've spent months on them— Fed them special diets—used the most rigid selective breeding. Irradiated them with that new gadget I made—the chloroscope. You remember my showing it to you? I've got something here the world's been waiting for. It's the most sensational thing in the field. Don't you understand, Rosa, we'll make millions! We could get married. We—"

Rosa sniffed, indicating she was not to be appeased. "I don't think it's such an original idea. I've heard of such things before. And it doesn't explain that woman."

ERIC HEINKLE was a young man with a naturally sunny temperament, but just now he suppressed an intense urge to seize this young woman by the scruff of her slender neck and shove her face down into the soft loam where he sat. Instead, he got up, brushed the knees of his coveralls, took her arm and gently steered her over to the glass door that led to the orchid room.

"Go on in," he ordered.

Inside it was a little steamy, but what glazed the vision and rocked the sensibilities was the riot of color that filled the place. Orchids everywhere. Hundreds of divergent species in kaleidoscopic hues.

"Over there in the corner," Eric said, "are the new black ones. Go over and smell them; then you can leave. At least you'll know I didn't lie about that."

Rosa went, diffidently, to look them over. They were one of the ground varieties, growing on massive, stub roots unlike the tree epiphytes, and the blossoms, weird-shaped, imaginative blobs of color, a deep, rich red that was almost black, grew profusely.

She bent over and sniffed. It seemed to Eric that she buried her face in the plants. "Don't crush them," he warned.

Rosa turned and looked at him. There was a completely un-Rosa-like expression on her face. In her black eyes he detected the look of a whipped, but still adoring puppy dog.

"What's the matter?" said Eric with some trepidation. The primordial male animal in him recognized the look instinctively, and yet it couldn't possibly be. Not Rosa!

She advanced upon him with slow purposefulness. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him with such hungry deliberation that he found his breath coming hard before the break.

She took off her hat and threw it on the floor. It was a new one. It had cost fifty dollars, he'd bet, if it cost a cent.

"Rosa!" he said, strangling on his wild gladness.

Her eyes never left his own for an instant. She began to unfasten the waistcoat of her suit. There was a quantity, an aura, here that was unmistakable even to Eric. "Rosa!" he said.

He ran toward the front of the store, yelling for his father once. He had some vague intention of calling a doctor. Then he recovered his senses. He hurried back to the orchid room.

MRS. CLARISSA SKELLY opened the fancy box without gratefulness. Flowers from Edgar had ceased long ago to move her emotionally. The first years they had been given and received

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as a token of something or other, she supposed, that they'd fancied they had in common. A symbol of such narrow-minded affection as one like Edgar might feel, but now it had become a dogged reminder of an obligation he had ceased even to feel, but continued out of respect for the conventions.

She knew he wouldn't be home tonight. The gift assured her of that. Once a week, each Saturday afternoon, they came, and that was invariably the night he "worked late at the office." But she knew all about Edgar's escapades, and he couldn't hurt her any more.

She opened the box. A rose-like scent was wafted to her, as she lifted the inner, glassine cover. But they were orchids. She sniffed deeply, and then lay back on the couch with her mind radiating all manner of strange, daring designs.

Presently she got up, dressed, and went out.

It was the first time she'd felt well in years. She went to a large, gaudy, neon-and-plastic place, the What's-its-name Club, which she had passed many times on the street car, but never entered, and she drank a funny-looking pink thing that tasted pleasantly terrible. Afterwards she drank several more. At 1:00 a.m. she struck a waiter with a water pitcher and was sent home in a cab.

IT WAS a beautiful white box, tied with red string, and the note said, "get well quick." For a moment it was just as if Sarah Ann wasn't there in the hospital any more. As if she hadn't spent three of her nineteen years here, and she was going on her First Date, and the flowers were from her escort. She curtsied gracefully in her party dress and accepted the token of this young man's adoration. It was so real. But nobody except Uncle Will would have thought of flowers, and she knew it.

She opened the box. They were brilliant, dark red flowers the like of which she had never before seen, and they lay under a hemi-cylindrical transparent cover. She removed the dome and smelled them. . . .

After a while she thought it would be nice to be out there in the park with the sun shining on the lake. Out of the hospital. And suddenly she floated several feet above the bed.

The nurse came in, screamed, and fainted, but Sarah Ann was already edging toward the window. She floated out and hovered just three hundred feet above the city street for a while, as whim dictated, then moved on. She held an orchid in her hand and sniffed it appreciatively. Wouldn't the kids down there envy her, though!

VIRGINIA KLUTZ, who was known in her particular line of work as "Bebe D'Ancone, the Parisian Tease," found herself at one of those so-important crossroads in life where upon the decision of the moment may hang one's fame and fortune. Bebe's trouble was, specifically, two men. There was nothing unusual in this, except that one of the men happened to be Edwin D. Morley, who owned a forest of oil derricks with steadily see-sawing pumps, and a sizable chunk of two railroads as well.

The florist's box on her dressing room table from Morley could mean the first step from rags to riches, she was sure, in the age-old tradition of her profession, but there was one catch to the lovely dream, and he was waiting outside her door at this moment.

He was James Wilkerson, who didn't have the price of a theater ticket in his pocket right now, she'd warrant. The leech.

Oddly enough, she hadn't thought of him as being a leech until just this moment, after the flowers came. She'd thought of him as rather a nice boy, despite the fact that he hung around pool rooms too much and worked his private detective agency just enough to keep himself reasonably respectable. How blind she must have been!

Still, it was easier said than done, get-

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ting rid of Jimmy. He was crazy jealous, and they'd been seen around together for more than three years now.

(So long!) Well, she must be in a rut. It was quite a problem; one she didn't feel like solving right now.

Bebe opened the box. Inside were not one, but six dark orchids in their moisture-beaded glassine container. They looked cool and beautiful. And opulent. Jimmy always sent short-stemmed roses—when he sent anything at all.

Suddenly Bebe sniffed the orchids suspiciously. Her first impression had been correct. They smelled deliciously of gay ballrooms, and of fine, fifty-dollar-an-ounce perfume. Of little Oriental gardens, and rich, flower-strewn private estates. *Heaven,* thought Bebe, *what'll they think of next!*

She buried her nose deeply in the exotic blooms. Someone—Jimmy, of course—was pounding on the door. She sighed, put the orchids back in their box, and dug into her purse.

She took out something and wrapped it in her handkerchief. She opened the door.

"Hi, Bebe," Jimmy said, "thought you were going to keep me out here all night." That was Jimmy; unnecessarily light-hearted as always.

She took the little pearl-handled revolver out of the handkerchief and shot him twice, where she guessed his heart to be.

THEY didn't exactly shine a glare light in Eric Heinkle's face, but the effect was the same. He tried to be thankful for one thing; they hadn't dragged his father into it yet. His mouth felt dry from answering questions.

"Come over it again," the detective inspector ordered.

"Inhibitions," Eric said thickly. He had used the word so many times that it had begun to sound silly. "All I tried to do was to give the orchids an odor, because then everybody would want to buy them, and we could use the money, believe me. How was I going to know it would affect their inhibitions?"

"Whose inhibitions?"

"*Their* inhibitions. Those women. Knock the props from under their ids and loose the b-beast in them. Even my own girl—" He was suddenly lost in a fit of black, bottomless self-pity.

He went on, "Once all the social mores and customs are wiped out, all the fears and repressions, anything can happen—and did. The orchids. I don't know why. It must have been a mutation caused by treating the seeds with hard radiation. I raised them from seeds you know, Inspector. They were like ch-children to me." A tear trickled woefully down Eric's cheek.

"Havet you been drinking?" said the detective inspector with sudden comprehension.

"A little," Eric said, and blew his nose. Rosa had run out on him. That was what he had been thinking about. Nothing else mattered now. You would have thought by her actions that he had deliberately planned all this. If he ever got out of the mess, he promised himself, he'd let Mendel's Law strictly alone for the rest of his life, even if he had to take up ditch-digging as a profession.

It was almost midnight, and eleven cups of coffee later when they let him go.

THERE were three plainclothes cops in front of the shop when he got back. A light still burned inside. He identified himself and went in.

His father sat in front of the littered old desk, barely visible behind the potted palms. He peered out, and when he saw Eric, smiled in welcome. In deep German he said "Do not worry so; I am not worried."

"Sure," Eric said. When his father lapsed into the old tongue there could never be any misunderstanding, any bad feeling between them.

"The phone rang while you were at the police station."

"Who?" Eric said.

"Someone calls himself Skids Madi-

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son. You ever heard of him?"

"Heard of him! Why, Dad, he's one of the biggest racketeers in the Midwest. Slot machines, lotteries, even dope running, they say. What could he want with us?"

"To buy the secret of your orchids," said Heinkle, Senior, imperturbably. "He will pay a hundred grands. How much is that?"

"Hundred *grand*. It's a hundred thousand dollars."

Mr. Heinkle's white eyebrows raised. "So much?"

"What did you tell him?"

"That you would talk to him."

A hundred thousand dollars, thought Eric moodily, would pay off the lawsuits. Not that he cared much. Still, a man like Madison—. "I'll have to think it over, Dad," he said.

"One thing else he said."

"What's that?"

"We better sell if we know what's good for us."

ERIC walked slowly back to his lab feeling much like a turkey on Thanksgiving. He kicked a watering can aside with such force that it rebounded, clanging, against the far wall.

Back in the lab the tulips in their wall boxes looked tired and thirsty, but he didn't bother to sprinkle them. No use in that.

So deeply immersed in his troubles was he that he didn't even notice the girl who came in behind him. He sat with lean jaw cupped in his hands for several long minutes before his gaze focused on her legs, there by the door.

"Rosa!" He sprang to his feet.

Her eyes were dark pools of concern. "Hello, Eric," she said.

He sat down again. "You forgot something, I take it?" he said.

"Don't be like that. I didn't know you were in trouble, or I never would have left. How could I know?"

There was a lump in his throat. He forgave her for a million wrongs yet uncommitted in one blinding moment that he was later almost ashamed to recall. And then, naturally, he found that he had her in his arms; and she was yielding. In such a dark day, it was a splendid moment.

But reality found them, eventually.

Eric told her about the phone call, and she was afraid on his shoulder.

"You mustn't sell," she said earnestly.

"I don't know," he said. "It's a lot of money. Think what we could do with that much money. Anyway, so long as I've got you back I don't care if I never see another orchid."

Rosa's voice was suddenly petulant, almost pleading. "Listen, Eric, you don't understand! Why do you suppose I came here tonight? You can't imagine what the feeling is like. It's as though all the bonds and shackles in life sudenly fall aside, and you are a different person in a new world. But it's not a dopey, heroin-addict's world. It's *real*. The honest-to-goodness world through rose-colored glasses." She plucked at his lapel with nervously insistent fingers. "Can you deny it to the world, Eric? To—to me?"

He had a sudden surge of fear, saw for the first time the hidden horror that had escaped them all. *This thing was an addiction!* This was not really Rosa here. He should have known all along—the eyes. Rosa might be cold; she might be aloof; but she was his Rosa and he loved her. There were beads of sweat on his forehead, and no longer the slightest of alcoholic fog in his brain. Destroy them! He'd have to destroy every one, at once.

"Please, Eric!" She was crying now.

He felt the strain. She clung to him as he shoved her into a chair. "Sit there," he ordered.

He opened the glass door and went into the orchid room, closing and fastening it behind him.

When he turned around, the thin, dark man was there. He nodded pleasantly. There was a half-apologetic wisp of a smile on his face.

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WHO are you?" Eric said. "How did you get in here?"

"*Who* I am is not important," the dark man said. "But the fact is, I did have a very difficult time getting here, since you mention it. I hope you will not cause additional trouble. You see, I came about the orchids."

"So," said Eric in the approved fashion of his favorite movie melodramas, "You're one of Madison's men. You sure got here in a hurry. But it won't do you a damn bit of good. The cops are outside. I don't see how you got through them. I don't see—"

His visitor chuckled. "Of course you don't. I'm not whoever-you-just-said. It's rather difficult to explain. I—that is, we live very near here, and yet we are, in the ordinary sense, almost infinitely remote from you. That explains why we have never met before. I daresay we never would have met—the crossover is quite complicated and expensive, you know—if it hadn't been for those confounded orchids."

"A nut," said Eric succinctly.

"On the contrary," said the dark, thin man, "a probabiilty stream transference, but I could not, of course, expect you to understand that. Now I must insist that we get down to business."

"Which is?"

"The orchids belong to us. I have come to take them back. They are too dangerous to be permitted in your culture. I shall try to explain what happened, though we aren't at all certain ourselves. It appears that you, a being of this probability stream, happened to plant seeds that coincided with a similar project in our own continuum. This is not so surprising as it sounds, for there is much that is parallel in our relationship."

"Just a minute," Eric said. "Are you trying to spring some of that old dimensional warp business on me?"

"You know?"

"I read a little," said Eric sourly. "*What* I read is my own business."

[*Turn page*]

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"There is little more to tell. Apparently there was some mix-up in the subatomic structure patterns that make up both our worlds. They are very nearly identical, you know."

"Would radiation do it?" asked Eric.

"It could."

"Must have been my chloroscope irradiator that was responsible."

"Very likely. The point is that your civilization simply isn't up to it. It isn't adjusted to the same psychological tempo as ours."

"You can say that again," said Eric, thinking wistfully of Rosa. "But you needn't worry; I'm getting ready to destroy all the plants."

"Admirable reasoning, but I'm afraid we can't take the chance of your missing something. I have waited here for you to return, because we do not like to interfere without your permission. After all, they are your orchids, in a sense, as much as they are ours. Also, we'd very much like you to promise us that it won't happen again."

"Don't worry," Eric said. "Just tell me what I have to do."

"You must destroy the irradiator and build a new one. There is an error somewhere in the circuits of the one you now have that most probably could not be duplicated again in a million years. So far as these orchids are concerned, give your consent to their destruction; then leave me here alone for a few seconds. I am sorry, but our methods of transmission must be kept secret."

"Done," Eric said. He turned and went toward the door. Then he looked back. The dark man still stood there. There was a half-quizzical smile in his eyes. "Good-by," he said. "You have a very beautiful garden here. Good-by forever."

"Good-by," Eric said, overlooking the drama of his words, and went out.

ROSA was waiting for him in the lab. Her eyes were red-rimmed and she looked spent, but not beaten. There was courage in the look she gave him; something of the old Rosa.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes. They—they're gone, aren't they?"

He glanced toward the glass door. Behind its frosted panes there was a sudden upsurging glare of light. It lasted for a very few seconds. Then it was gone.

"I think they're gone," Eric said.

She sighed. "Somebody called your father while you were in there," she said.

"Madison?"

"No. It was from the hospital. Your lawyer was there. The man the actress shot will live. They're going to be married, believe it or not. And the other suits have been dropped. He has convinced the plaintiffs that they have insufficient evidence. It winds up your troubles. Seems almost like divine intervention in your favor, doesn't it?"

"Not divine," muttered Eric quickly.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Anyway, there's one very big problem left. The most important. Where do we go from here? You and I? I can't promise that I'll be much different from now on. Of course if you'd like to marry a half-interest in a greenhouse, we ought to do well from now on, with all this publicity. I—"

She kissed him coolly.

"I'll probably go right on experimenting with flowers," he said.

"Orchids?"

"Not orchids," he said. He wished he'd thought to ask the dark, thin man about the reported levitation of that girl in the hospital paralytic ward. He felt like he could do it himself, at the moment.

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"Somebody is pinching women all the way up Elizabeth Street . . ."

DR. LIGHTNING

By GUY DeANGELIS

A large charge was just what the doctor prescribed for himself

YOUNG Dr. Stanley Macklin rose toward his office in the tower of the Arcade Building as the storm lowered itself down on the city.

Neither was conscious of the other's approach. The storm was a dark and heedless thing, trailing invisible tentacles from the undersides of its sullen clouds as it sought a mate in the passionate potential of the earth. And since Dr. Macklin was also engaged in a relatively dark and heedless search for a mate, he was in no mood to think of the weather.

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One bony fist kept squeezing a small box in his pocket. There were two rings in it—an engagement ring and a wedding ring. The doctor's objective was his nurse and receptionist, Maureen Stacey, and he swallowed nervously as the elevator let him out on the twenty-second floor.

Aren't they pretty rings? That's what I'll say, he thought. Go ahead, Maureen. Try them on for size. Well, now that you have them on you might as well keep them on. The engagement ring, at least, because—because I—

Stan Macklin swallowed again and pushed open the door to his office suite. Maureen wasn't there. True, he had no appointments that afternoon. And he had come back from his weekly stint at a clinic a half hour later than usual. He went through the reception room to his office to see if she had left him a note. Full length windows opened on a terrace already beginning to glitter with rain and the place was dim with storm. There was no note and he went back to the reception room.

Then he saw the sheet of paper in her typewriter.

Darling, darling, darling (it read). *Yes, I mean you, Stan. I'm sorry to leave you without notice but I can't stand this another day. I love you so much and you seem so blind to it. I've tried to show you how I feel, but you're such a perfect gentleman you don't recognize a girlish pass when you see one. I wish you were a low-minded heel. And loved me.*

I don't know why I should feel this way about you. At your best you look like a cross between a half-starved Gregory Peck and an overstuffed Abe Lincoln. Maybe I've been in love with a man who isn't there. Maybe you're just a half-alive creep, Doctor—a stuffed shirt!

Holding his breath, Dr. Macklin pulled the sheet of paper out of the machine so that he could read the rest of it.

In any case (she had written), *I've got it so bad a drastic cure is indicated. I've been invited to spend a few days at a man's hunting lodge and I'm going up there with him. No TV, no radio, no telephone. Nothing but lots of food and good liquor and—well, never mind. We're taking the 3:55 to Brownwich and then going on from Brownwich by car. So, by the time you get back to the office it will be too late to stop me. Even if you wanted to.*

You won't find any tear stains on this letter. Tears don't fall on the paper when you're typing. I just found that out. They fall down among the keys and get lost. . . .

"Maureen!" Stan Macklin yelled. Thunder drowned him out. He ran through his office and out into the rain on the terrace. Some of the citys window-pocked cliffs and towers stood up bright and clear and some were dim with rain as the storm dappled the city with sunshine and shadow. He looked at his wrist watch. The time was 3:45. Her train was leaving in ten minutes. Lightning dazzled him and he stretched his long arms out toward the squat cupola of the Terminal, as if he could drag it across the city toward him, and Maureen with it. One of the storm's intangible feelers brushed across his body and, in an instant, contact was made.

Cold lightning struck upward from the terrace at 20 million miles an hour, bridging the man and the heart of the cloud above him with terrible fire for a ten-thousandth of a second.

The ratio of charge to mass shifted insanely in every atom in his body, and in everything he wore or carried. Negative electrons became positive and tried to veer away from the positive neutrons at the center of their orbits, like repelling like. Yet, through the infinite caprice of lightning, the indefinable holding force which augments the electrical balance of matter was also stepped up, so that it held the rebellious electrons in their places. The overload found its outlet in speed, and the electrons began to whirl in their accustomed orbits at a dizzy new pace.

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ACROSS a screen of blindness Stan saw reflections of the ferment within himself: multiple bands of jittering horizontal light, snowstorms of ultra high frequency pips and shifting patterns like ghostly honeycombs and albino alligator hide. They might have reminded him of a television screen flicking from channel to channel, had he been in condition to reason at all.

That was close, he thought, after a little while. Plenty close. Numbly, he looked about, nagged at by a suspicion that something was offbeat. It was the rain. It was not falling. It was drifting down, more slowly than the flakiest snow might descend. And the twinkling dance of raindrops at his feet had stopped. Instead he saw a multitude of tiny circular fountains rising and falling lazily about the spots where the raindrops landed.

It didn't matter, Stan decided. Nothing mattered except Maureen. Somehow, he was going to catch up with her and bring her back.

Habit made him stop long enough to pick up the black bag he had left in the reception room. When he reached the elevators and stabbed at the "down" button, something snapped and the button broke loose and fell back inside the wall. Stan stared at the gaping little black hole it had left. "Hell!" he said, and hurried toward the stairs.

His legs felt a little rubbery when he reached the big vaulted arcade on the ground floor, twenty-two floors below. Then he noticed something that made him forget everything else. There were plenty of people in the arcade but none of them seemed to be moving at all. They weren't just standing still. They were in all sorts of walking positions and everything about them was as instinct with motion as a snapshot of a sprinter. Stan shook his head groggily. Catatonic? he wondered. No, they didn't have that self-hypnotized look.

Stan went to look out into the street. He found he was going almost on tiptoe. Perhaps that was because it was so quiet, he thought. At first there seemed to be no sound at all. Then he heard it. Not the normal sound of the city on a busy afternoon, but a deep drone like the long-drawn bellow of a foghorn. It was overlaid with other sounds: resonant ones like bass horns, flat ones like cracked bass drums and hollow ones like echoes in a deep well.

Out on the street nothing moved. Nothing. It was like a three-dimensional photograph of a street scene. There were people and cars and busses and taxis—but nothing moved. A fat man was bent over painfully, his fingertips inches away from a coin he had dropped on the pavement. A pretty girl held a newspaper over her head to ward off the almost static rain. Her still skirt flared a little with arrested motion. At last an English sparrow began to drift up out of the gutter, his wingbeat unfolding as slowly as the petals of a sleepy flower.

Dr. Stanley Macklin backed away into the shelter of the arcade. The signs, the window displays, the building itself—all the familiar inanimate things were unchanged. But wherever there should have been motion there was only a sculptured simulation of it. A neon sign said "Cocktails" and Stan nodded to it gratefully.

WHILE he had known it was there in the arcade of the building he had never spared the time before to drop in at the Tic-Toc Club. There was nothing familiar about the faces of the statue-people there. Stan went to an unoccupied stool in front of a white-jacketed bartender. "Whisky, please," he said hopefully. The bartender ignored him, holding a glass in a towel as if he had been polishing it and had stopped short. "Let's have some Scotch!" Stan snapped. "Well, say something, will you? Say anything!"

The man was as still as ever, holding his towel and glass. Stan fought down an impulse to beat his fists on the bar and yell. Instead he slid across the

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smooth surface, belly down, and got himself a bottle of Scotch and a glass from the back bar. "That's the way to do it," he said inanely to a man sitting next to him. The man held a highball glass poised halfway up to his mouth and he paid no attention to Stan.

Lively crowd, Stan thought. He tried to pour himself a drink. The whisky shot out steaming into the glass and disappeared in a fine spray. Carefully and slowly he tried again. It was like trying to pour half-frozen molasses uphill, but after a long time a couple of fingers of whisky had oozed down into the glass. He drank it as gently as he could, but even so it hit his stomach like lead and then seemed to be dissolving into foam.

By that time the bartender's hands had shifted a little and the man next to the young doctor had the highball glass a little nearer his mouth. "Pardon me," Stan murmured, and put his fingertips on the man's free wrist. It was convincingly warm and palpable, but quite still. No pulse, Stan thought. The fellow must have no circulatory system at all. Like a vegetable.

His own reflection in the bar mirror was vaguely comforting. I know I'm here, if no one else does, Stan decided. His image nodded. I'll talk to you, like a ventriloquist's dummy, he thought. Again Stan's image nodded and his own thoughts came bouncing back to him from the mirror.

What's going on around here?

I don't know, Stan admitted. The whole city can't have fallen into a state of suspended animation. Suspended, at least, to the point where motion is all but imperceptible and systole and diastole are no longer apparent. Deterioration of the tissues—gangrene—would set in. Human beings can't survive without the circulation of the blood to the entire system.

Then maybe they're not human beings, his reflection thought. Maybe they're humanoid vegetables.

What are you thinking of? That science fiction fable about parallel universes? Different worlds existing in the same space and time, but in different dimensions?

Is it a fable? Look around you, Doctor. Remember that bolt of lightning on the terrace just before you came down? It didn't miss you after all. It must have tagged you right on the button and blasted you into a parallel universe because any fool can see this isn't the world you were born in. This is a world mired in time. A world of infinite slowness.

That would account for the nature of the sounds here in the bar, Stan admitted. I suspect that sound like a triple-tongued tuba is ice tinkling in glasses, and the heavier rumble like marine diesels two decks down is the conversation of a crowd at slow speed. You know how a phonograph record growls when you slow it down. I wonder where the vegetable being who was Dr. Stanley Macklin in this world has gone?

He's probably in your place in your good old mammalian civilization, with everything whizzing about him at such impossible speeds that day and night are nothing but a flickering of light and dark.

Where is Maureen? What is she?

In this universe she's nothing but a gorgeous turnip, going to seed somewhere with some male vegetable. Back in the other universe she's doing the mammalian equivalent. If she was lost to you before, she's doubly lost now.

STAN put his head down on his arms and shut out his reflection. His ear was right next to his wristwatch. There was no ticking sound. He shook the watch and it made a noise like a tin can full of buckshot. At least one thing hadn't weathered the trip to another dimension, he thought.

He looked up at the huge ornate clock which gave the Tic-Toc Club its name. It had a sweep second hand as long as a broom handle and after a while he determined that it was moving, perhaps a shade faster than a cornstalk grow-

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ing. Each second on the clock was divided into tenths. Stan put his fingertips on his other wrist and began to take a pulse count. By the time the sweep hand had traversed a tenth of a second he had counted some 420 beats!

Stan Macklin put a dollar bill down beside the bottle of Scotch, picked up his black bag, and went out.

The inescapable logic of mathematics began to dominate his mind as he walked numbly toward the street. It began to click out answers with monotonous precision, and he didn't like any of them. A count of 420 beats would normally require—taking 70 per minute as a convenient round number—about six minutes, or a tenth of an hour. Yet he had reached that total in a tenth of a second. At that rate he was living a solid hour for every second that went by in this vegetable world.

No wonder he was invisible! He remembered that a movie camera clicks off some 16 frames a second to complete the illusion of movement, since the eye fails to register any image of less than a sixteenth of a second in duration. At this rate he would have to remain absolutely motionless for three minutes and 45 seconds to become visible for even a fraction of a second. And he would have to speak at the impossible drawling rate of two or three words an hour to become audible.

Then there was the velocity with which he must be moving! He was flying through this vegetable world like an erratic projectile. Walking at only one mile an hour he would cover 5,280 feet a second. A speed of 3,600 miles an hour!

Stan stopped and glared at the people in the street. There was no hurry. It was still within a second or so of being 3:45 in this world. That left him ten vegetable minutes—six hundred hours at the rate at which he lived, or twenty-five days—to reach the Terminal and watch a vegetable Maureen take off for Brownwich with some cabbage head.

And then what? By the time this ridiculous planet had completed a revolution and marked off one of its interminable days he'd be nine-odd years older. In less than a week he'd be dead of old age.

The fat man in the mouth of the arcade had finally bent over far enough to get his fingers on the coin he had dropped. He looked as if he might begin to straighten up in an hour or so. Compared to me, Stan thought, he's practically immortal. He suppressed a desire to kick the fat man in his vegetable fat pants. With my speed, he thought, it would break every bone in his body. If he has any.

The pretty girl with the newspaper over her head had completed half a stride. She was wearing a suit and the snug jacket of it cut across her hips at just the right place to accent their roundnesses. All at once, Stan could almost hear Maureen's voice coming out of his pocket, where her crumbled letter lay, repeating some of the things she had written.

"You're a half-alive creep! You're a stuffed shirt, Doctor!"

Is that so? Dr. Stanley Macklin wondered, moving closer to the pretty girl. You could be wrong about that, nurse. You could be plenty wrong. . . .

IN A precinct police station, a man in uniform closed a switch and spoke into a microphone. His voice came out of a speaker in a police prowl car many blocks away. "Calling Car Five. Calling Car Five. Answer!"

"Car Five standing by. Romano speaking. Over."

"Car Five, go to Eightieth Street and Esplanade. Riot reported near the Arcade Building. Over."

"Sergeant, we've already been over to the Arcade Building. It's a riot, all right, but not the kind you mean. Calm down, you crazy squarehead! Not you, Sarge. I'm talking to my buddy, Jensen. He's laughing so hard he can't hardly drive. Over."

"Romano! What's going on down

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there? Over."

"Like I was saying, Sarge, it's a riot. Somebody is pinching women all the way up Eightieth Street from Esplanade. He must have pinched a hunnerd of them in the last six blocks. Jensen! Get this heap down off the sidewalk! Over."

"Romano—how do you mean somebody is pinching women? Explain what you mean by that. Over."

"I don't know how to explain it any clearer, Sarge. Maybe with me having Latin blood it comes easy. How would you pinch if you came up behind some real luscious tomato with a classy chassis?"

"I'll have your Latin blood on the carpet when I get hold of you, Romano! Make your arrest and bring your man in. Over!"

"Be reasonable, Sarge. How can I arrest somebody I can't see? This character must jump in and out of sight so fast he's practically invisible. A dame will be walking along with nobody around and then all of a sudden she'll give a yelp and jump up in the air and start rubbing herself. Honest, Sarge, you'd never know Eightieth Street. Some of the women have fainted and some of them are putting the slug on every man they can reach and some are just moving slow and looking hopeful. The men around are taking it real big. A lot of them are laughing so hard they can't hardly stand up, and I got a idea a few of them are starting to sneak in a little pinching of their own."

"Car Five, you're relieved from duty. Get in here to precinct headquarters and bring Jensen with you. Over."

"Jensen's already gone. He stopped the car and hopped out when he saw a model walking along with a hatbox. You know how nice they walk. Excuse me a minute, will you, Sarge? A girl in a red dress just went by, and is she ever tender! Over."

"Romano—don't lay a hand on that taxpayer in the red dress. Romano! *Answer!* ROMANO!"

NEAR an entrance to the city's largest park, two men stood talking. One was a pleasant looking young man. The other was older, and not so pleasant looking. Overfed and under-exercised, he was like a big, pink, hairless Pekinese. He was saying:

"So you had your pocket picked, eh? And now you have no carfare home. And you want me, a total stranger, to lend it to you. That's your story, hey?" His voice was so loud people stopped to listen, making the young man uncomfortable.

"Yes, sir," he answered, almost whispering. "I—I can't identify myself because everything was in my wallet when it was stolen. But if you'll give me your card or something I'll send the dollar to you as soon as I get home. I live out in the suburbs."

The pink man's discolored eyes stared sidelong at a blonde girl sitting on a nearby bench. "Well, I'll tell you just what I'm going to do about your sad case," he trumpeted. "I'll give you the dollar providing you admit right out in front of all these good folks that you're a liar. This stolen-wallet-carfare-home story is as old as the hills. It's a racket with whiskers on it."

The young man turned away. "No, thanks! I'll walk all the way before I ask anybody in this town again!"

"Just a minute, youngster!" The pink man took hold of his sleeve. "You're going to take the dollar and admit you're just working a racket, or I'm going to turn you in to the police for begging without a license." He looked around at the people watching—particularly at the blonde girl. "Nobody's ever put anything over on me yet," he told them, "and nobody's going to start now!"

They began to laugh, but not the way he had expected them to. They seemed to be staring at his hat. Someone—someone he couldn't see—had turned it sideways on his head, like Napoleon's. Before he could straighten it, the ends of his tie flipped out of his jacket. Coiling like snakes, they stuffed themselves

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into his gaping mouth. All at once his flabby pink legs felt cold and drafty. Looking down, he saw they were bare. Someone had unfastened his suspenders and his trousers had fallen down around his feet.

Everyone in the city seemed to have joined the crowd about him, the sound of laughter was so loud.

STAN MACKLIN had decided to go through the park because it was the shortest way to the railway terminal. He wasn't quite sure why he had stopped to interfere in the tableau made by the pink vegetable and the others. Perhaps it was because the pink one looked like such a perfect stuffed shirt, and Stan had always longed to deflate one in public. It was a suppressed desire which might have surprised Maureen, had she known about it. But she would never know about it now, so that the things he had done to the pink vegetable—and to the female vegetables on Eightieth Street—seemed very pointless. Stan began to think about suicide.

I can't even kill myself decently, he decided. I can't see myself lying down in front of a "moving" truck and letting it squeeze the life out of me inch by inch, hour after hour. Even if I had a gun I couldn't blow my brains out with it. The bullet would probably come drifting out of the barrel with all the velocity of a falling leaf.

Rounding a bend in the path, he almost fell over a man lying there. The man was in trouble. He had been sick to his stomach, there was a high flush on his cheeks, and his still, contorted body was as full of implied motion as a statue of a bucking horse.

Almost without thinking, Stan loosened the man's clothes. He found tautness on the right side of the abdomen. "Hh-mm," Stan said, doctor-wise, to no one in particular. Acute appendicitis. Rupture and suppuration in the peritoneum was imminent. Surgery was clearly indicated.

Stan opened his black bag. Selecting a scalpel, he thought, the speed I'll be working at will virtually constitute cautery, so that I should be able to preserve asepsis.

He made his incision, knifed through the abdominal wall, and was exploring the tip of the caecum in what was quite literally no time at all. He was moving so fast that bleeding had not yet begun and there was no need to ligate at any point. He freed the swollen appendix, isolated it from the mesentery, and tied it off at the base. Then he severed it with a single stroke of the scalpel and tossed it into a refuse can.

Closing the wound was simple enough except that it seemed odd to be tying off the larger bleeders on the way out instead of on the way in. There was only a first faint hint of capillary bleeding at the lips of the wound as he sutured it into a neat red line. He put a dressing over the wound.

Stan sat back on his heels and grinned. He estimated his operating time at about one-quarter to one-third of a second, as far as the patient was concerned. No need for anesthetics because there hadn't been time for him to feel any appreciable pain. No loss of blood. No shock, because the man didn't even know he'd been cut.

The man! Those two words echoed hollowly in Stan's mind, and he stopped grinning. The man! This was no vegetable creature. Stanley Macklin had spent too many years familiarizing himself with mankind's insides to have any doubts about that. This was a man lying on the path.

And you call yourself a doctor! Stan thought furiously. The shock of finding he's been operated on without his knowledge might be enough to drive him crazy. Suppose he gets up and tries to walk away!

STAN took out a hypodermic and gave the man an injection—a shot that would keep him good and quiet. Then he wrote a note on his prescription pad.

An emergency appendectomy has

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been performed on this man by a qualified surgeon. Please see that he is taken to the nearest hospital for routine post-operative care. Here is a reward for the person who finds this man and takes care of him.

He tucked the note in the front of the man's shirt where no one could miss it, along with a twenty-dollar bill. Then he picked up his bag and went away. He didn't look where he was going at all, so that he walked absentmindedly into a goldfish pond and stood there ankle deep in water, thinking.

Look first to the mote in thine eye! I was the one who was hit by lightning, and I was the one who was changed. But I was just subjective enough to assume that everyone else had changed. This isn't a parallel universe. It's the same old world it always was. Everyone else is normal, and I'm living at a vastly accelerated rate.

He backed out of the pond as another thought occurred to him. Maureen! She was only a few blocks away. The real Maureen, and not a vegetable substitute! There was still time to get to the Terminal before her train left.

There was time for one long farewell look at her dear face before she went off to a man's hunting lodge where there was no radio and no TV and no telephone but just lots of food and lots of liquor and lots of never mind. Dr. Stanley Macklin began to run.

It was quite a distance to the Terminal but he ran all the way. He knew the train to Brownwich left from the lower level, and as he staggered down a series of ramps he began to feel cold and dizzy. His heart action seemed to be slowing down alarmingly, when it should have been pumping fast from his exertions. Fleetingly, he wondered if he was going into shock.

Then he saw Maureen. There she was, near the gate to the Brownwich train, an overnight case at her feet. Her back was toward him and her hair curled up in a bright copper halo around her little hat. She stood straight and still and Stan was too busy staring at her to notice the other people in the Terminal. Had he noticed them he would have found that they had begun to move, sluggishly yet definitely, like people in a slow-motion movie. And the sounds they made were beginning to rise out of the subsonic. But he was deaf to them as he hurried over to stand in front of the girl.

The sight of her erased any lingering doubts he might have had. No vegetable could look as wonderful as this. No mere legume could make his pulse quicken like this. Specks of light danced like fireflies across his vision and his heart seemed to be coming to a stop. With the last of his strength he put his arms around Maureen and kissed her.

ONCE again he saw the jittering bands of light and the shifting, ghostly patterns he had seen when the lightning struck him. Except that this time, somehow, they seemed to be moving in reverse. When they went away there was Maureen's face again, very close to his, eyes closed.

"I love you, my darling," he told her, wishing she could hear him. "I've loved you for a long time, but I didn't dare tell you. I couldn't believe you might love me too. You're too wonderful for me, or anyone. I'll love you for what's left of my life, no matter where you go. Or what you do, or with whom."

Maureen sighed and her eyes opened wide. All at once Stan realized that her arms had gone up around his neck, to hold him tight. Someone echoed Maureen's sigh. He managed to turn his head far enough to see that they were in the center of a group of very interested spectators.

"Boy, what a love speech!" said a woman in the crowd.

"It was nothing compared to the kiss," Maureen told her dreamily.

"What was it like, that kiss?" the woman panted. "Go on, dolling, tell us!"

"One great big wonderful purple flash," Maureen said. "And I heard music

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playing all up and down my spine."

"Hey!" Stan gasped. "Let's get out of here!" Scooping up his black bag and Maureen's overnight case, he hurried her away from the crowd. But after a few giant strides, he skidded to a stop.

"Wait a minute!" he said. "Where is the bum? I'll murder him!"

"Who?" Maureen wondered.

"The cabbage head. The guy you were going to the hunting lodge with!"

She looked up at him doubtfully. "I suppose it's not very smart of me to admit it, but—Stan, I wasn't going to any lodge with anyone! I left that note just to see what you'd do about it. I knew you'd get back from the clinic in time to come over here and stop me. If you wanted to. I simply had to find out how you felt about me, one way or another."

"Just for once, I got back from the clinic a half hour late," Stan told her. "So that I wouldn't have made it if—well, never mind. You'd never be able to understand it. I don't think I'll ever be able to understand it myself. I guess I must have been reverting to normal anyway, and that bright purple kiss drained off the last of the overcharge." He swung off in a new direction.

"Stan! Where are we going?"

"To get married. I have your engagement ring and your wedding ring right here in my pocket."

"You're certainly making up for lost time," Maureen panted, half running as he towed her along.

Stan Macklin grinned. "From now on," he said, "lightning is our middle name."

INVENTIONS AND DISCOVERIES

LISTED below in jumbled fashion are the names of 12 noted men of science, together with the inventions or the discoveries which are accredited to them. Can you match up at least 8 of them correctly for a passing score? 9-10 is good; 11-12 excellent.

1. HENRY CAVENDISH	(a) the use of slow neutrons in atom smashing.
2. CHARLES GOODYEAR	(b) rabies preventive.
3. ALFRED NOBEL	(c) oxygen.
4. BENJAMIN FRANKLIN	(d) the laws of electrical resistance.
5. ALESSANDRO VOLTA	(e) "inflammable air" (hydrogen) as a distinct substance.
6. GEORGE OHM	(f) the cathode ray.
7. MICHAEL FARADAY	(g) the tuberculosis bacteria.
8. LOUIS PASTEUR	(h) current electricity and the electric battery.
9. ROBERT KOCH	(i) a process for vulcanizing rubber.
10. ENRICO FERMI	(j) electromagnetic induction.
11. WILLIAM CROOKES	(k) the nature of lightning.
12. JOSEPH PRIESTLEY	(l) dynamite.

(Answers on page 130)

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THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 6)

Schomburg? He does covers for GOOD sf mags. Can you take a hint? Finlay's illo's were as always, masterful but I don't care much for Emsh.

Here are some more compliments. You must love me by now. That quiz in the August'ish was good. Let's make that a permanent feature in TWS. (I tried it and got a perfect score. Either I rank with Newton, Einstein and Sam Mines or it was just too easy. Don't let it happen again.) Another swell feature is your movie review. Your mag is getting better by leaps and bounds. Keep up the good work.

Sorry to spoil your perfect bliss so far, but I have a gripe. Lately you've been publishing too many trashy shorts. Where do you get them anyway? From the reject basket of Amazing Stories? (Whoops, swear word. Poppa wash my mouth out with soap.)

Any novels by the following coming up?: Kuttner, Jones, Leinster, Crossen, Smith, Pratt, Clark, Heinlein, Asimov or Van Vogt. (Don't answer that; it would take you five pages.)

I've run out of typewriter ribbon, so, now that we're acquainted, bye Sam.—*1113 N. Myers St., Burbank, Cal.*

P.S. I hear you edit SS too. You seem healthy enough otherwise.

You should wash out your mouth with chlorophyll. All us Martians have green tongues. Do we have any novels by Kuttner, Jones, Leinster et al, coming up? Well, as you have probably discovered by now, there's a Crossen in this issue and a Leinster coming up in next. SECOND LANDING Leinster's is called and it poses a nice tactical problem for would-be planet hoppers. You'll eat it up, we predict. Without chlorophyll.

HIGH DIVE
by Vivian M. Hutchins

Dear Sam: In re TWS for August: you are a man after mines own heart. (My husband shuddered at that one, but I like it. Not as good as "aloof", though.) I ask for more Crossen and so you print more Crossen. And with Finlay illos. yet. It wouldn't surprise me if our grandchildren ranked the latter with Albrecht Dürer.

I'm disappointed—here I thought I had something in common with de Camp, but I guess Pratt will do just as well. Having lived over half my life in Brasil I enjoyed the Viagens Interplanetarias stories very much. Even spells the Portuguese correctly. All too frequently writers will quote in a foreign language and either misspell the words or jumble up the grammar, which is infuriating, and always makes me think the Joe wanted to prove the was a big shot only to fall flat on his face for his pains.

About the housewives-to-STF movement—Sam, have you read any of the articles in the women's "service" mags in the last year or two? Such tripe, slush and whimsicality—not guaranteed to help the digestion, I assure you. Maybe there are "Tweet little sings" in this land of ours who enjoy that kind of stuff, but count me out.

What's wrong with men as such? I think we women are emancipated enough now so that we shouldn't have to carry chips on our shoulders. Marriage is great fun if you are smart enough to pick the right man, and lucky enough to land him after you pick him. I'll admit I wouldn't be happy with the type of male who expects a woman to keep her nose to the household grindstone 24 hours a day, nor would a majority of women, I believe. However, I doubt if most present day men would expect that. Labor saving kitchens, etc., have given the modern gal a lot more time on her hands than mother or grandma had, so its not surprising that she is casting around for new things to keep her occupied in her spare time. And there's nothing like collapsing on the couch after the kids are in bed and diving into a new STF mag for taking you out of this world and its dirty dishes into one where they are disposed of automatically. Maybe the cave woman had something when she just moved into a nice new cave when the old one got too piled up with old bones.

Keep us amused and interested and we'll keep passing out the shekels for your mags, Sam. And we don't shock anywhere near as easily as we used to, so long as the four-letter Anglo-Saxon words are left out. They just aren't nice.—*Denville N.J.*

Just now we are feeling a wee bit pessimistic about the modern male. He shows a distressing tendency, by the time he hits forty, to burst through his modern ideas and education like a pupa coming through its cocoon, and revert right back to type, with grandpa's ideas intact in his noggin. That doesn't mean he won't be good to his wife, but if he allows her any intellectual freedom he's a rara avis indeed. So if you got one like that, hang on to him.

A STAKE FOR BURNING
by Tom Pace

Dear Sam: I was stopped dead in my tracks by George Smith's matter transmission theory, but I still enjoyed BOOBY PRIZE immensely. Having worked for a research outfit, I appreciate the hero's struggles to find a practical use for a lovely but utterly useless little beast of a gadget . . . and the answer he *did* find delighted me completely. Hoo boy. Now I can quit having mass-ratio nightmares, eh?

Also, due to Georgi's story, I have a new Olympic Sport . . . dusting monatomic particles from girl's frontpieces. Humph, as my friend and yours, Albert Alligator, might humph. Humph.

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THE BELLY OF GOR JEETL . . . Ha, an interplanetary. Falstaff. That's my boy. THE POLITICIAN . . . botanical rape? Cor blimey. THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER. . . . never meddle with life-forms you don't completely understand, eh? I guess that includes women and race horses, my two weaknesses. Racing cars and rockets are so much more predictable. And *almost* as pretty. Almost.

THE SIBLING. Once there was a war between a place called Greece and a place called Troy . . . This is what I call color Stf. As best done by Jack Vance and the Kuttners and, sometimes, Ray Bradbury. I liked it . . . SIBLING, I mean.

If the Reverend and undoubtedly revered C. M. Moorehead cannot find it possible to believe that religion has, in the past, been tempered with—in fact, a part of—commercialism; or that it will be impossible for the future to combine hucksterism and soul-fishing, then he must be a remarkably weak platoon leader in the Eternal War.

So TURNCOAT was "an intolerant and prejudiced presentation in story form . . ." . . . "A scurrilous attack against Christianity" . . ? Odd. I read TURNCOAT. And I usually look eagerly for anything I consider a worthy addition to my collection of Vile and Sacriligious Material. But I felt TURNCOAT to be disappointingly innocuous. Maybe I'd better read it again. Moorehead seems to be able to find evil where few other people can . . . thanks, Rev. Moorehead!

You know, Sam'l, I've met a few Christians (and Moslems and Jews and Mammonists) who have sufficient faith in their god that they do not feel it necessary to look for violation where none has been committed. Evidently Reverend Moorehead has not.

Oh, well. What am I worrying about? I don't *have* to read the letter column.

Poor Sam. He does.

You know, Sam'l, a preacher who can give off large, angry blue sparks in the pulpit ought to be a hell of a good draw! Poor old Billy Graham . . . does he know about the competition potential?

You know, Sam, heckling the Godly is fun. Almost as much fun as heckling the ungodly, which I also enjoy. Since quail learned to go *toward* the shooter, insteal of away from him—a horribly unnerving tactic—this has been almost the only really *safe* sport left to mankind. Sports cars spin out and crash. Spearfishermen get et by barracuda. Tiddlywinkers occasionally get blinded by a foul flip. But parson-baiters only get read out of the congregation . . . and anyone who cannot stand this sort of puishment deserves to be beaten over the head with a copy of "Fountainhead" until dead, anyway. . .

To get serious for a minute . . . very serious. I solemnly submit that any man of God who states, as Rev. Moorehead has, that he "has no serious quarrel with an atheist who declares flatly that he does not believe in God" is not a Christian and is fraudulent in representing himself by the title of Reverend. I do not believe that any Christian, or any religious person in the world, for that matter, could accept that statement from his pastor.

I loved Maurice Cox's letter. I could not stand reading letters by someone who is a religious man or who has use for religious bigots. I am pleased to find that Hitler was merely taking Freud a step further, and that editors should always be careful about publishing stories that try to break down existing things. I am preparing a stake upon which to burn you, Sam Mines.

It is nice to find that nature hates a vacuum, also. I have never believed the astronomers' baloney about the vast almost-perfect vacuum that is most of the universe.

It is entirely possible that 95% of real people are less alive than the wooden one-dimensional characters of early science fiction. What did I do with that HBomb, now . . .

Ah, well.

I had hoped to be at the Philacon. Sam'l . . . . complete with a case of bourbon, a bewildered non-Stf-reading wife, and the chastity belt concession. However, it looks as if I won't be . . . it probably won't fit in with the Army's schedule. Where can I get a road map of Korea, and how are the summer resorts north of the 38th Parallel? Or are we interested in that sector, now? I'm confused. If they insist that electronics men make the best riflemen, I'm agreeable. But what does that make riflemen?

To the hills, Men . . . the damn has bust.—*109 N. Thayer Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan.*

Leave us hope, Thomas, that they have stopped throwing things at each other in Korea by the time you get there, or that they cancel your passage entirely due to some small peace having broken out. 'Fraid it'll be a small one at that.

Otherwise may we offer a small *merci* for your spirited words, hither and yon. One of the recompenses of running this dogfight is that we so seldom have to fight ourselves. So many of the boys and girls are willing to swing a shillelagh for us. Take care of yourself, Thomas, and keep us posted.

MUSIC DEPARTMENT

by Philip José Farmer

Dear Sam: I'm pleased that some one noticed that, though Eddie Fetts was a baritone, he sang *Che Gelida Manina,* a TENOR aria. Mr. Davidson was quite right in pointing that out and in being mad. However, Sam, your face needn't be red nor need Mr. Davidson stay mad. "Naught exists save mutability," and everything, even physics, biology, the pattern of the stars, and the course of the Mississippi, change. Marion Zimmer Bradley wrote me a letter, pointing out the same thing that Mr. Davidson did. But she wanted to know if I was being very, very subtle, after all. During the past two hundred years, some operatic parts have changed. Rosina in the *Barber of Seville,* originally written for mezzo-soprano, is now usually sung by a coloratura. I knew that, but I did not know, as she pointed out, that Adalgisa, in *Norma* by Bellini, once a famous light soprano part, is now invariably given to a contralto. Did I mean to imply that Rodolfo's tenor role was now assigned to a baritone?

Music, as much as anything, if not more, will play a part in the future, and therein lies a brand-

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new field of development for sf writers. I only used it in MOTHER as a device for portraying the change in a character and for hinting at certain psychological sublimations. But I could not resist also hinting that even such a stable and conservative thing as 19th century Italian opera was subject to flow and flux. Unfortunately, I could not stop to explain, and I did not think that it would matter. As you say, there was always the fact that singers play around.

Mr. Davidson wants the TWS containing LET THE FINDER BEWARE. If my memory is correct, that came out in an expanded version as JACK OF EAGLES by James Blish. If Mr. Davidson doesn't want to buy the book and still prefers to get the magazine version, I'll send him my copy. I'm moving soon. I have to get rid of some excess. I'll be glad to do so as one opera lover to another.—*621 Barker, Peoria, Ill.*

So much for the music appreciation course and we trust all you boogie-woogie fans out there are left feeling elevated by your brief brush with culture.

GLOOMILY YOURS

by David (Vinegar Dave) Mason

Dear Sam: You'll be SOO-O-O-Ry, if you're not already. I am, of course, referring to the sex and thence to the birth control gabfest which is beginning to steam away in the colyumns of the Aether Wibrates. There are 180,000,000 people in the country, give or take a couple of million, and not one single mumbling soul in the lot is going to think logically on any question involving S*E*X*; certainly no one of the hot-eyed adolescents who write letters to promags can view these things calmly. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure *I* can; but I'll try.

This is a peculiar civilization, and its sex mores, judged by an outsider, would seem to be the most peculiar thing about it. Those warped and shaky sex patterns are going to contribute more powerfully than most people suspect to the eventual collapse of the whole culture. But what I'm driving at is simply this; you can't discuss rope in the house of a recently hanged man, and you can't sanely discuss sex in 20th Century North America. Oh, all you ladies and gents *sound* sane enough, with your learned remarks on neurotics and stuff, with the enunciation of the various sacred names of Ghu, beginning with Freud, and your bold banging away at the corpse of the dead dog of religion. But you don't kid me. Present one of the young ladies who most vehemently yawps about her modern outlook with a live and lustful male, and she'll run like a spooked heifer. Or, to complete the picture, observe the hairy chested young rakes who write similar letters, when the opportunity to catch up with one of those same heifers presents itself. Ferdinand!

The intellectuals of our culture, in other words, (and temporarily we can call fans intellectuals) talk about sex and are scared to death of it. The rest of the population doesn't talk about sex because they don't know enough words; instead, they practice it, bemusedly and with considerable trouble, sorrow, and difficulty, but persistently. But everybody, intellectuals and hoi-polloi, wallows in the self created mess that our moral structure is, under the vain delusion that if you make enough noise about a problem you are contributing to its solution.

The only thing that will solve our problems of morals and sex, as well as a good many of our other problems, is the complete collapse of our whole culture. We have the means of self-destruction, the bombs, the germs, and the will to use them, since after all, we have already used them to a certain extent. We have nothing, anywhere in our whole culture, to survive *for*, as a culture.

There will be survivors, though; plenty of 'em. You'd probably be surprised how many people could manage to stay alive through even a first class atomic war. There would, of course, be millions of the sane, healthy, fairly civilized people of the countries which our culture calls backward. Too backward to get killed, in fact. And there would be a large number of local citizens fast enough on their feet to stay alive and intelligent enough to adjust to new conditions.

The only thing that bothers me about the imminence of W.W.3, beyond the problem of being in a target area myself, is that dear old TWS will undoubtedly become just some charred paper, inextricably mingled with bits of Mines. Alas.—*926 47th Street, Brooklyn, N.Y.*

Such a catalogue of woes we have not run into since our adolescent dabblings in the doggerel of an obscure poet named Nostradamus who also was obsessed with the idea that mankind was going to blow itself up, poison itself, stab itself and jump off the bridge. Maybe it will. But as long as there are going to be survivors, as you insist, old homo sap will get another chance to do it all over again. o

AND THE HOPEFUL TOUCH

by Les Anderson

Dear Mr. Mines: Would like to see WONDER revert to its original name SCIENCE WONDER STORIES—go digest size—keep the cold war and atomaniacs to a minimum—keep cynicism and violence under control—take a positive approach. Science, you know, can also benefit mankind. (I hope.). *47 Woodland Ave., San Francisco 17, Cal.*

PRIVATE LIVES

by Norman J. (The Original) Clarke

Dear Sam: Just spent a fascinating evening. Got a pile of SS and TWS for several months back and thumbed happily through the letter colyumns. Some of the *Cwaziest* people right letters. (I write letters.) Since this missive is directed to TWS, I'll stick to a few outstanding letters from that magazine.

First of all, a few months back, a kid (twelve years old) by the name of Tom Piper mentions "femmes" on the covers, and refers to them as being "larger and nuder". Now, Sam, I ask you? Is this progress or is this progress? There was a time (so I've heard) when any young man under the age of thirty thought that *femme* was merely another slightly racy French word: And the same young man would blush painfully at the thought of any woman being *nude*. I forget what era this was in, but still, the idea of a 12-year old speaking so glibly and with all the blase sophistication of an old roue . . . ah me! I suppose it's terribly un-

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modern to suggest that his parents should clobber him a coupla good ones.

In the same issue, there was a letter from a real crazy character calling himself Petro "the Great" Propaganda . . . or, no, that's Rodriganda, and he says, "greater genius than mine is impossible". Glad to hear it, "Great", old chap. That's what I've been saying about myself for years, and you'd be surprised how many people don't agree. Or have you had that experience, too?

And now—ha! Two subjects leap up at me. A creature named E. M. Britney from Toronto, Canada, said, a while back:

No. 1.—" B A N theological controversy in your book."

No. 2—"Why should any of your correspondents feel that their private opinions on religion matter to anyone but themselves?"

We have tons of this type in Canada. "Ban" is the most popular word in Canada. Sex novels are O.K. in Canada as long as they are disguised under the name of "Love" and are properly insinuating and un-frank. Therefore, Caldwell is banned. Steinbeck is banned. Colonel C. E. S. Wood is banned. I expect at any moment that Shakespeare will be banned. All the smutty, double-entendre, nauseating little authors are, if not praised, at least permitted, for they do not call a spade a spade. No. They call a spade by any other name, and it does not smell sweet. Gaaaa! I wrote a letter to an Ottawa newspaper on this subject and lo and behold! I was pounced upon from all sides (via the paper's letter column) and labelled with such tags as "neo-pagan", "free-thinker" (used as a derogatory term) and, believe it or not, "Communist" in capital letters! Sammyweel, you wouldn't believe it . . or would you?

As for private opinions on religion not mattering to anyone but the persons whose private opinions they are . . horse-feathers! Every religion existing had its beginnings in someone's private opinions, which interested other people enough to start a cult which sometimes enlarged to a full-scale, popular religion.

Personally, I like nothing better than to listen to someone expounding his religious theories, as long as these theories are well-thought-out, and not merely rapid speeches.

Sure, theological discussions are always pointless, because there is no solution, but that does not mean they're not interesting. No, sirree! It's because there is no solution that these discussions are so interesting. So here's for bigger and better religious feuds, and my money is on the agnostics. The hide-bound atheists and the hide-bound theists are too much alike. They are too damned certain of their own infallibility.

To Marion Zimmer Bradley (ah, Zimmer the good old daze!) -I say Tush-Tush and Pish-Pish! Anthony K. Van Riper wrote a letter a while ago that was *longer* than yours, and he said that the Virgin of Zesh was a *good* story. And besides, he used a French phrase. You didn't so obviously, your opinion about the story was Wrong. You didn't even use one French word. Although, after all, I thought it should have been, "autres temps, autres *moeurs*", not *mores,* except that the "o" and the "e" in *moeurs* should be kinda squashed together, and maybe that's hard to do. However, Van Riper wins by a phrase.

To sum up, I've decided not to bother summing up, as I have babbled over with enthusiasm far too long already. I intended to write only a few lines on the amazing variety of fans who write letters, but I got carried away.

Not far enough? Did you say that, Sam? You're very cruel.—*411 Mayfair Ave., Ottawa, Ont., Canada.*

It may come as no shock to most of our readers that we haven't the slightest intention of dignifying these ribald remarks by replying to them. Anyway, you should have seen what we *cut out* of his letter. But we confess to finding it funny—to those who frown we can only admit that we've never been able to resist this kind of carrying on.

BREAD AND BORED

by Sid Sullivan

Dear Sam: Great green and purple polka-dotted Ghu, the theories some of these fen bring forth! This time meaning Paul Mittelbuscher's belief that we want to get rid of you men. My deah boy, I cheerfully admit that you all are egotistical inconsiderate, work-creating pests, but so are children, puppy dogs and six room houses. Yet what woman would want to get rid of those?

It isn't lack of courage that makes a woman depend on her husband for support. Many of us would much rather earn our own way . . . witness all these modern working wives . . . but the strain on a child with a part-time mother is much worse than the strain on hubby's pocket book when she doesn't work. Take the obvious way out, you say, and don't marry or have children? It won't work. You see, you sweet, unindustrious, unthoughtful creatures, we love you. We wouldn't do without you, no more than without the children and houses. In a way, our need is as great as yours. We want to be wanted. Get that? And without a man to satisfy that need, life would be too absolutely lifeless.

Sure, we give a lot to you men, but we get a lot in return. A man gives his wife support . . . a house, clothing, food, and countless false explanations should he want to have a beer with the boys . . . and for what? We keep that house clean (he would be as content in a single messy room), wash and iron his clothes (he wouldn't have to feed and clothe a laundry), cook his food (the same as for laundries), and bear his children (which he could happily do without). The only thing the poor guy gets for ninety percent of his salary and freedom that he wants or couldn't get cheaper and better while single is—the love of a woman! Are we really worth so very much?

Sure, we work like dogs for you but the things you give us are the things we want while the things we give you are the only things that we think you should have. Like ice cream sodas and castor oil differs.

After all this, what matters a little infidelity? (A *little,* mind you.) There are so many worse things a man could do—beat her or be a drunkard or gamble outageously. True, nothing can hurt quite so much as a strayed handkerchief smeared with orange lipstick. A wife faced with such an object is liable to think, "He doesn't love me. If he did, he wouldn't be interested in anyone else." Trouble is, hubby's mind doesn't work that way at all.

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What probably happened is that hubby, after a tiring day in the grease pit, stopped for a beer and happened to sit down by a brassy blonde who batted foot-long eyelashes and proceeded to make noises so, "Hello, you great big handsome thing," and after a few more beers, drenched in *that*, hubby completely forgot that his wife is terribly hurt by orange-smeared handkerchiefs or even that he has a wife to hurt. Besides, it's so nice to prove that someone besides Sasparilla thinks he has bulging muscles.

All together now! HE'S JUST A SWEET IRRESPONSIBLE LITTLE BOY. Okay, if you can confute me, start confuting.—*761 N. Holmes, Memphis, Tenn.*

Most wives feel about infidelity the way they do about garlic—there is no such thing as a little. And Sid, where did you get this charming cynicism? Or are you just fishing for indignant letters?

BARGAIN SALE
by Carol McKinney

Dear Sam: Wish I could find just *one* story to rave about this time in the June ish of TWS, but, Sam—you tried so hard, too—they were all hopelessly mediocre. On the other hand, there weren't any bad enough to rate screams of rage or shocked gasps, either. We all realize, you hope, that a STAR OF WONDER and NO LAND OF NOD don't turn up every ish.

Say, Sam—don't quite see what you were riled up about??? (Referring to the "Four of the gooiest lines in the history of prose literature" squib before the letters in the April ish.) Bet nobody would have noticed it if you hadn't modestly disclaimed the honor of writing this bit of deathless literature! Really, now—what was so bad about it anyway??? (All fen may now madly scramble for their back ishs and see what it's all about.)

Oh! What you said!—"We try to print letters which offer back numbers because we get so many requests ourselves for back numbers, which we cannot fill. Hope you-all are properly grateful for this little exta service."

And then, in the very next sentence—"Some ten or twenty thousanl letters remain—egad—and no space."

You will now be deluged by at least sixty-nine thousand letters, all offering to dispose of back ishs—and you think you don't have room *now!!!*

Wait!! All is not lost—yet!! You have one of two alternatives! (Preferably both, but we won't be greedy).

1. Go weekly.
2. Make a nice, new, spacious personals department.

Well?? Which is it going to be??

Please, now, may I be no. 37,517??? You see—I have quite a few back numbers myself that are slightly clogging a few rooms—these range from 1940 to date and include practically every mag to see the outside of a printing press. These are going quite reasonably, too. (For instance—1952-53 pulp sized are only 15c). Anybody interested, I hope???.

Take care of those "ageing arteries" Sam—try SLUGGULS spelled backwards it's SLUGGULS. —*385 No. 8th East St., Provo, Utah.*

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Howcome you can tell the difference between a good story and a mediocre one and you can't tell the difference between "four of the Gooiest lines in the history of prose literature" and my usual deathless witticisms? Someone been spiking your hemlock broth, Carol?

Have considered both your alternative suggestions for a long and deliberate four seconds and have decided to hold out for a third.

THE FIXERS

by MariAn Cox

Dear Sam: Pat Kovacs is *so* right. No matter how hard we poor females try, there's always some male to find fault with us. And the ones who do most of the fault finding could stand a few improvements themselves.

But about this cover feud: I have a confession to make. When I started clamoring for males on the covers, I was trying to stir up something. Looks as if I succeeded. Frankly, I don't give a hoot what you put on the covers. You could leave it off entirely and I'd still buy your mags. But enough of anything can get monotonous, so let's have variety. Instead of the same old brass-brassiered babes, stick in a man now and then, or a space ship, or a flying saucer, or even a picture of Sam Mines. (Yeah, I'd like that. Bill Hamling got his face plastered all over the cover of IMAGINATION a while back. Why don't you try it?) But if we must stick to girls, gave them eye appeal as well as sex appeal, huh?

My request had one result which I didn't foresee. A fan wrote to ask if I'm really a frustrated old maid. At eighteen? Hardly. And believe it or not, I do like men.

Sam, when's TWS gonna get trimmed edges? It took me twice as long to read the first SS that had 'em, because I stoppel every other page to admire the effect. Let's do the same for TWS.

Incidentally, I notice that you have an unclad male illustrating Murray Leinster's story. Thanks be to somebody or other that you didn't put *that* on the cover!

One more word before I close. If any modern male doesn't like women, just let him remember that he'd be in an awful fix without them. Er, just what kind of fix would he be in? Or would he be, period? Oh, you can figure it out.—*Hq. 521st A.D. Gp., Air Base, Sioux City, Iowa.*

When you work up a gretty good magazine circulation you don't monkey with it by putting the ed's picture on the back cover unless you can get Gregory Peck or someone to stand in for him. But Holt & Co. are a courageous firm and seems like they're going to do that very thing on the back jacket of the STARTLING anthology they are publishing October 5th. Pretty rash I calls it. But the book is going to be the McCoy just the same. The best stuff from SS and a couple from TWS that shouldn't be left out. Nothing that has ever been anthologized before. (Plug.)

[*Turn page*]

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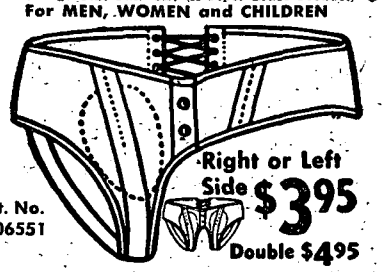

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So here we are with a few million letters left and we will try to give them the one sentence business. Someone wrote in recently and griped that these letters we summarized sounded more interesting than the ones we printed in full. They ain't kidding—it's just our genius in picking the high spot of each missive.

So—Enid Pril of 2161 Bowing St., Johannesburg, 18, So. Africa just copped the December '52 issue and writes to rave about NO LAND OF NOD and CAPHIAN CAPER. Didn't like Canterbury April, who wants to go into the past? Depends on the kind of past you've got, natch. Thomas Boardman, Jr., Cascade, Maryland, says we should brush up on our history. William the Conqueror was 1066 and Chaucer didn't arrive until 1340. So also says R. R. Anger, 23 Doncliffe Dr., Toronto, Ont., Canada and Aline Thompson, 13652 Ottoman, Pacoima, Cal. Hmmm. Next to math, history was our worst subject.

James Fennimore Cooper Jr., 852 Albert St., Dickson City, Pa., says the only charge he got out of the June TWS was from Doc Carpenter's "Adventures of Procaine Hydrochloride In The Big City." So did we. Dale Stoin, Dalton, Ohio, is palpitating for a copy of THE LOVERS—also says he converted his English teacher by slipping her a copy of Bradbury's THE ILLUSTRATED MAN. Ron-Ellik, 232 Santa Ana, Long Beach 3, Cal., grumbles "Diapers Schmipers" and says we are slipping, all on account of Robert Sheckley's FISHING SEASON. Also is convinced that Jim-jam-Jim, the third head of the hack who writes all our stories is Merwin. So that's what happened to him?

Mrs. Ila Crawford, Springdale, Utah, has to drive 50 miles each way to get a copy of TWS or SS. Wants to trade issues of SS with THE LOVERS and MOTH AND RUST for the issue of FSM with YANK AT VALHALLA. Val Walker, 6438 E. 4th Pl. Tulsa, Okla., liked only the Manning Draco story and our editorial. Egad, somebody liked an editorial at last. Martin Gross, 1118 Boynton Ave., N. Y. 72, N. Y., says science fiction has still got a chance if we don't let it go the way of the mystery story, slanted for 12 year mentalities. Noah McLeod, Christine, N. Dakota enjoyed CAPTIVE AUDIENCE, but says the gal with feathers on the cover isn't Yahna, cause Yahna was a red-feather, so this must be her albino kid sister. And he also wants to know how a gal hatched from an egg could have a navel? Dunno Noah, maybe she was born at sea. Maril Shrewsbury, Box 1296,

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Aransas Pass, couldn't wait to tell us that MOTHER wasn't as good as THE LOVERS and MOTH AND RUST. But she thought TRS was better than usual. Go fight City Hall.

Joe Keogh, 63 Glenridge Ave., St. Catharines, Ont. is struck cold as stone by our squint through the crystal ball and inspired guess that he'd turn to his own letter before reading the others. Abashed, that's wot 'e is. Tom Piper, 464 19th St., Santa Monica, Cal. says letters like those of Doc Carpenter's give him a pain in the molars. Charles Wells, of the fanmag FIENDETTA, 405 E. 62nd St., Savannah, Ga., doubts that Portuguese will become the international language, despite de Camp. Nominates English. I'll buy that too—I can't speak Portuguese. Calvin Thos. Beck, 8416 Elmhurst Ave., Elmhurst, 73, L. I., N.Y. wants SS and TWS to stay bi-monthly—there aren't enough good stories to go around. We found that out.

Cal. Bobby Stewart, Rt. 4, Kirbyville, Texas, was intrigued by the editorial on the Sun, says he went up to check and the theory is all wrong. The stars are nothing more than places in the ceiling up above us where some oil wells were dug too deeply. George H. O'Connor 419 Fifth Ave., Watervliet, N.Y., says if someone doesn't send him a copy of THE LOVERS he will go nuts. Shouldn't you write to SS about it, George?

Dick Clarkson, 410 Kensington Rd., Baltimore, Md., agrees that society has lots of inertia, but feels that science fiction is helping to move it. Robert Kvanbeck, 417 17th Ave., North, Minneapolis, Minn., liked Alex Samalman's pome PROGRESS. J. Martin Graetz, 307 So. 52nd St., Omaha, Nebraska, has discovered that we aren't printing his letters because we can't think up a snappy heading for them. That's just Graetz. On our nerves.

Bill Peck, 1041 W. Agaritha Ave., San Antonio 1, Texas, announces the first Texas Science Fiction Convention, the TEXCON. Tentative date Labor day weekend, for those who can't get to Philly. Write him. Bob Farnham is that-away about Manning Draco and applauds NO LAND OF NOD. Says they got plenty blue-noses in Jawjuh.

Janice Searles, 13815 Telegraph, Wyandotte, Mich., writes her first letter after 15 years of reading stf—thinks the improvement has been wonderful—has a word to say on the war of the sexes that a lot of women marry men just out of relief that the character didn't make a pass at them. This is a reason?

Hope this holds you—all until next time. See you right back here. —*The Editor*

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SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW

THE GOLDEN APPLES OF THE SUN by Ray Bradbury, drawings by Joe Mugnaini, Doubleday, New York, 250 pp., $3.00.

IN THE long-awaited anthology of Bradbury short stories, science fiction readers can take heart from the fact that hardened reviewers, enchanted by the author's poetic prose, are giving science fiction more than a passing nod.

This collection contains some exceptional short stories, a few of which are readily recognized as science fiction, set as they are in the challenging world of tomorrow. Most reviewers agreed on the merit of *The Pedestrian, The Murderer, The Wilderness, A Sound of Thunder* and the title story of the collection. More subtle, perhaps, are the beguiling fantasy, *April Witch*, the story of an adolescent witch who wants to taste human love, and *Embroidery*, which we found an effective parable of the Three Fates and the A-Bomb.

However, the most important science-fiction story of them all, as we see it, might easily have escaped notice. It would take an *aficionado* to spot it.

The Flying Machine, set not in the world of tomorrow, but in the shadow of China's Great Wall, *circa* 400 A.D., tells the fable of the first man in China to fly. Equipped with a flimsy structure of bamboo, paper and reeds, the inventor's only concern is that he has, indeed, made like a bird. The Emperor whose responsibility it is to plan for the future, sees in the discovery a threat to the security which the Great Wall represents. The flying machine serves to illustrate the eternal conflict between progress and security. How far security can be insured at the expenes of progress is not yesterday's problem alone: it is today's, and surely tomorrow's as well. And this may well be the most significant contribution of the science fiction genre: to point to these conflicts which have dogged the steps of man from the caves of Cro Magnon to the craters of Luna, and to present them as effectively and entertainingly as Mr. Bradbury can do.

A word of praise to the illustrator here: his line as poetic as Mr. Bradbury's prose, and his sensitive drawings add greatly to the beauty of the book.—*P.J.*

Answers to Quiz on page 121

1-e, 2-i, 3-l, 4-k, 5-h, 6-d, 7-j, 8-b, 9-g, 10-a, 11-f, 12-c.

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